

INFINITY

SCIENCE FICTION

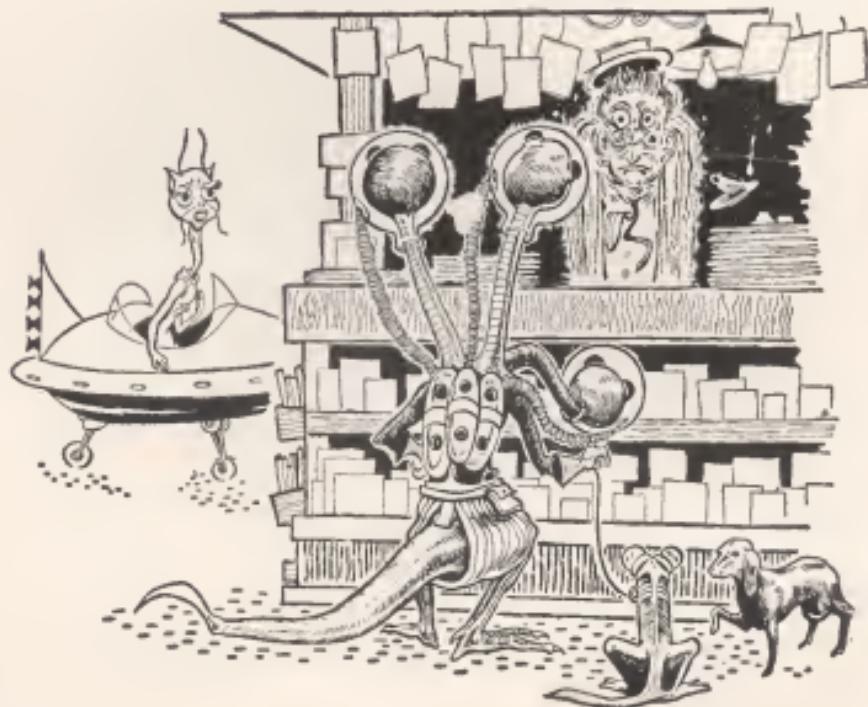
April
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He's a
**ROCK 'N' ROLL
SUPERMAN! . . .**

LEG. FORST.
by CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



That's Right— I Said *Three* Copies!



Of course we love customers like this, who buy three copies of every issue of *Infinity* and *Science Fiction Adventures*—one for each head!

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Remember, monsters of distinction have subscriptions. See full details inside.

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By the editor



THE INFINITY AWARDS

BEING a science fiction writer is, by and large, a proud and lonely thing. If you live in a small town, as many do, your friends find you a constant source of humor, and to your face never stop expressing their doubts that people actually pay good money for that crazy stuff. If you live in a big city, it isn't much better: your friends know you write, but are quite confident that you can knock out a novelet in 15 minutes or so right after breakfast, so they do not hesitate to interrupt you for fun and games (or a small loan) at any other time.

As for the financial rewards... well, even during "boom" periods they're nothing to brag about. You can count the number of people currently making their livings by writing science fiction full-time on your thumbs, practically. Writers who want to get rich, or simply to buy that second car the average American family is supposed to own, use science fiction only as a stepping stone to better-paying fields. There are plenty of editors and publishers who would like to see this situation improve, but until there are hundreds of thousands more readers, very little can be done.

It is with the primary purpose of making sf writing more rewarding, then, that we have decided to institute a series of INFINITY AWARDS. The awards will be given, each year, to the writers of the best sf books published during the preceding year. Each writer selected will receive a suitably inscribed plaque, which if nothing else will demonstrate to him that his efforts are appreciated. Names of the winners will, of course, be published in INFINITY.

The judges will be INFINITY's editing-publishing staff, including of course our book reviewer, Damon Knight. The Awards for 1957 will be announced next issue; we did not want to choose before the very end of the year in case a potential winner appeared at the last minute (this is being typed very early in January). There will be anywhere from two to six categories, depending on an analysis of the books actually published. And we sincerely hope the Awards will provide added incentive for writers in the future, and thus improve the overall quality of the field.

Be here next issue for the announcements, and for Damon Knight's survey of current activity in sf book publishing.—LTS



Do Unseen Powers Direct Our Lives?

ARE the tales of strange human powers false? Can the mysterious feats performed by the mystics of the Orient be explained away as only illusions? Is there an intangible bond with the universe beyond which draws mankind on? Does a mighty Cosmic intelligence from the reaches of space ebb and flow through the deep recesses of the mind, forming a river of wisdom which can carry men and women to the heights of personal achievement?

Have You Had These Experiences?

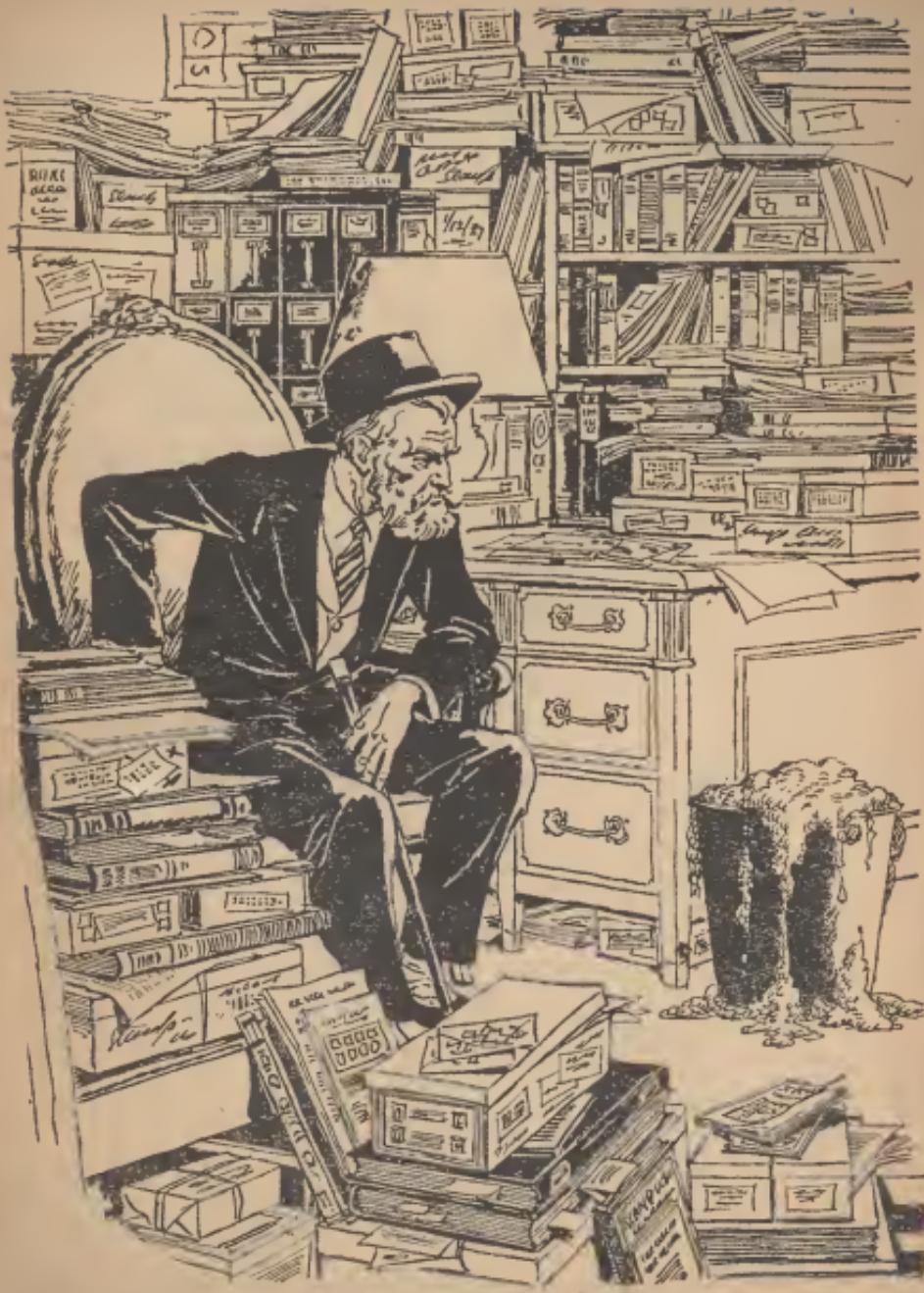
... that unmistakable feeling that you have taken the wrong course of action, that you have violated some inner, unexpressed, better judgement? The sudden realization that the silent whisperings of self are cautioning you to keep your own counsel—not to speak words on the tip of your tongue in the presence of another. That something which pushes you forward when you hesitate, or restrains you when you are apt to make a wrong move.

These urges are the subtle *influence* which when understood and directed has made thousands of men and women masters of their lives. There IS a source of intelligence within you as natural as your senses of sight and hearing, and more dependable, which you are NOT using now! Challenge this statement! Dare the Rosicrucians to reveal the functions of this Cosmic mind and its great possibilities to you.

Let This Free Book Explain

Take this infinite power into your partnership. You can use it in a rational and practical way without interference with your religious beliefs or personal affairs. The Rosicrucians, a world-wide philosophical movement, invite you to write today for your *Free* copy of the fascinating book, "The Mastery of Life" which explains further. Address your request to Scribe R.E.Y.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)
San Jose, California



LEG.

FORST.

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK



LEG. FORST.

It started with stamps and the

Widow Foshay's beef broth. But

the stamps were alien, and the

broth was pretty peculiar, too!

Illustrated by PAUL ORBAN

CHAPTER I

WHEN IT WAS TIME for the postman to have come and gone, old Clyde Packer quit working on his stamps and went into the bathroom to comb his snow-white hair and beard. It was an everlasting bother, but there was no other way out of it. He'd be sure to meet some of his neighbors going down and coming back and they were a snoopy lot. He felt sure that they talked about him; not that he cared, of

course. And the Widow Foshay, just across the hall, was the worst one of them all.

Before going out, he opened a drawer in the big desk in the middle of the cluttered living room, upon the top of which was piled an indescribable array of litter, and found the tiny box from Unuk al Hay. From the box he took a pinch of leaf and tucked it in his cheek.

He stood for a moment, with the drawer still open, and savored the fullsome satisfaction of the

taste within his mouth—not quite like peppermint, nor like whiskey, either, but with some taste akin to both and with some other tang that belonged entirely to itself. It was nothing like another man had ever tasted and he suspected that it might be habit-forming, although PugAlNash had never informed him that it was.

Perhaps, he told himself, even if Pug should so try to inform him, he could not make it out, for the Unukian's idea of how Earth's language should be written, and the grammar thereof, was a wonder to behold and could only be believed by someone who had tried to decipher one of his flowery little notes.

The box, he saw, was nearly empty, and he hoped that the queer, faithful, almost wistful little correspondent would not fail him now. But there was, he told himself, no reason to believe he would; PugAlNash, in a dozen years, had not failed him yet. Regularly another tiny box of leaf arrived when the last one was quite finished, accompanied by a friendly note—and all franked with the newest stamps from Unuk.

Never a day too soon, nor a day too late, but exactly on the dot when the last of the leaf was finished. As if PugAlNash might know, by some form of intelligence quite unknown to Earth,

when his friend on Earth ran out of the leaf.

A solid sort, Clyde Packer told himself. Not humanoid, naturally, but a very solid sort.

And he wondered once again what Pug might actually be like. He always had thought of him as little, but he had no idea, of course, whether he was small or large or what form his body took. Unuk was one of those planets where it was impossible for an Earthman to go, and contact and commerce with the planet had been accomplished, as was the case on so many other worlds, by an intermediary people.

And he wondered, too, what Pug did with the cigars that he sent him in exchange for the little boxes of the leaf—eat them, smoke them, smell them, roll in them or rub them in his hair? If he had hair, of course.

He shook his head and closed the door and went out into the hall, being doubly sure that his door was locked behind him. He would not put it past his neighbors, especially the Widow Foshay, to sneak in behind his back.

The hall was empty and he was glad of that. He rang almost stealthily for the lift, hoping that his luck would hold.

It didn't.

Down the hall came the neighbor from next door. He was the loud and flashy kind, and with-

out any encouragement at all, he'd slap one on the back.

"Good morning, Clyde!" he bellowed happily from afar.

"Good morning, Mr. Morton," Packer replied, somewhat icily. Morton had no right to call him Clyde. No one ever called him Clyde, except sometimes his nephew, Anton Camper, called him Uncle Clyde, although he mostly called him Unk. And Tony, Packer reminded himself, was a worthless piece—always involved in some fancy scheme, always talking big, but without much to show for it. And besides, Tony was crooked—as crooked as a cat.

Like myself, Packer thought, exactly like myself. Not like the most of the rest of them these days, who measured to no more than just loud-talking boobies.

In my day, he told himself with fond remembrance, I could have skinned them all and they'd never know it until I twitched their hides slick off.

"How is the stamp business this morning?" yelled Morton, coming up and clapping Packer soundly on the back.

"I must remind you, Mr. Morton, that I am not in the stamp business," Packer told him sharply. "I am interested in stamps and I find it most absorbing and I could highly recommend it—"

"But that is not just what I meant," explained Morton, rather

taken aback. "I didn't mean you dealt in stamps . . ."

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Packer, "to a limited extent. But not as a regular thing and certainly not as a regular business. There are certain other collectors who are aware of my connections and sometimes seek me out—"

"That's the stuff!" boomed Morton, walloping him on the back again in sheer good fellowship. "If you have the right connections, you get along O.K. That works in any line. Now, take mine, for instance . . ."

The lift arrived and rescued Packer.

IN THE LOBBY, he headed for the desk.

"Good morning, Mr. Packer," said the clerk, handing him some letters. "There is a bag for you and it runs slightly heavy. Do you want me to get someone to help you up with it?"

"No, thank you," Packer said. "I am sure that I can manage."

The clerk hoisted the bag atop the counter and Packer seized it and let it to the floor. It was fairly large—it weighed, he judged, thirty pounds or so—and the shipping tag, he saw with a thrill of anticipation, was almost covered with stamps of such high denominations they quite took his breath away.

He looked at the tag and

saw that his name and address were printed with painful precision, as if the Earthian alphabet was something entirely incomprehensible to the sender. The return address was a mere jumble of dots and hooks and dashes that made no sense, but seemed somewhat familiar, although Packer at the moment was unable to tell exactly what they were. The stamps, he saw, were Iota Cancri, and he had seen stamps such as them only once before in his entire life. He stood there, mentally calculating what their worth might be.

He tucked the letters under his arm and picked up the bag. It was heavier than he had expected and he wished momentarily that he had allowed the clerk to find someone to carry it for him. But he had said that he would carry it and he couldn't very well go back and say he'd rather not. After all, he assured himself, he wasn't quite that old and feeble yet.

He reached the elevator and let the bag down and stood facing the grillework, waiting for the cage.

A birdlike voice sounded from behind him and he shivered at it, for he recognized the voice—it was the Widow Foshay.

"Why, Mr. Packer," said the Widow, gushingly, "how pleasant to find you waiting here."

He turned around. There was

nothing else for it; he couldn't just stand there, with his back to her.

"And so loaded down!" the Widow sympathized. "Here, do let me help you."

She snatched the letters from him.

"There," she said, triumphantly, "poor man; I can carry these."

He could willingly have choked her, but he smiled instead. It was a somewhat strained and rather ghastly smile, but he did the best he could.

"How lucky for me," he told her, "that you came along. I'd have never made it."

The veiled rebuke was lost on her. She kept on bubbling at him.

"I'm going to make beef broth for lunch," she said, "and I always make too much. Could I ask you in to share it?"

"Impossible," he told her in alarm. "I am very sorry, but this is my busy day. I have all these, you see." And he motioned at the mail she held and the bag he clutched. He whuffled through his whiskers at her like an irate walrus, but she took no notice.

"How exciting and romantic it must be," she gushed, "getting all these letters and bags and packages from all over the galaxy. From such strange places and from so far away. Someday you must explain to me about stamp collecting."

"Madam," he said a bit stiffly,

"I've worked with stamps for more than twenty years and I'm just barely beginning to gain an understanding of what it is all about. I would not presume to explain to someone else."

She kept on bubbling.

Damn it all, he thought, is there no way to quiet the blasted woman?

Prying old biddy, he told himself, once again whuffling his whiskers at her. She'd spend the next three days running all about and telling everyone in the entire building about her strange encounter with him and what a strange old coot he was. Getting all those letters from all those alien places, she would say, and bags and packages as well. You can't tell me that stamps are the only things in which he's interested. There is more to it than that; you can bet your bottom dollar on it.

At his door she reluctantly gave him back his letters.

"You won't reconsider on that broth?" she asked him. "It's more than just ordinary broth. I pride myself on it. A special recipe."

"I'm sorry," he said.

He unlocked his door and started to open it. She remained standing there.

"I'd like to invite you in," he told her, lying like a gentleman, "but I simply can't. The place is a bit upset."

UPSET was somewhat of an understatement.

Safely inside, he threaded his way among piles of albums, boxes, bags and storage cases, scattered everywhere.

He finally reached the desk and dropped the bag beside it. He leafed through the letters and one was from Dahib and another was from the Lyraen system and the third from Muphrid, while the remaining one was an advertisement from a concern out on Mars.

He sat down in the massive, upholstered chair behind his desk and surveyed the room.

Someday he'd have to get it straightened out, he told himself. Undoubtedly there was a lot of junk he could simply throw away and the rest of it should be boxed and labeled so that he could lay his hands upon it. It might be, as well, a good idea to make out a general inventory sheet so that he'd have some idea what he had and what it might be worth.

Although, he thought, the value of it was not of so great a moment.

He probably should specialize, he thought. That was what most collectors did. The galaxy was much too big to try to collect it all. Even back a couple of thousand years ago, when all the collectors had to worry about were the stamps of Earth, the field even then had become so large

and so unwieldy and so scattered that specialization had become the thing.

But what would a man specialize in if he should decide to restrict his interest? Perhaps just the stamps from one particular planet or one specific system? Perhaps only stamps from beyond a certain distance—say, five hundred light-years? Or covers, perhaps? A collection of covers with postmarks and cancellations showing the varying intricacies of letter communication throughout the depths of space, from star to star, could be quite interesting.

And that was the trouble with it—it all was so interesting. A man could spend three full lifetimes at it and still not reach the end of it.

In twenty years, he told himself, a man could amass a lot of material if he applied himself. And he had applied himself; he had worked hard at it and enjoyed every minute of it, and had become in certain areas, he thought with pride, somewhat of an expert. On occasion he had written articles for the philatelic press, and scarcely a week went by that some man well-known in the field did not drop by for a chat or to seek his aid in a knotty problem.

There was a lot of satisfaction to be found in stamps, he told himself with apologetic smug-

ness. Yes, sir, a great deal of satisfaction.

But the mere collection of material was only one small part of it—a sort of starting point. Greater than all the other facets of it were the contacts that one made. For one had to make contacts—especially out in the farther reaches of the galaxy. Unless one wanted to rely upon the sorry performance of the rascally dealers, who offered only what was easy to obtain, one must establish contacts. Contacts with other collectors who might be willing to trade stamps with one. Contacts with lonely men in lonely outposts far out on the rim, where the really exotic material was most likely to turn up, and who would be willing to watch for it and save it and send it on to one at a realistic price. With far-out institutions that made up mixtures and job lots in an attempt to eke out a miserly budget voted by the home communities.

There was a man by the name of Marsh out in the Coonskin system who wanted no more than the latest music tapes from Earth for the material that he sent along. And the valiant priest at the missionary station on barren Agustron who wanted old tobacco tins and empty bottles which, for a most peculiar reason, had high value on that topsy-turvy world. And among the many others, Earthmen and

aliens alike, there was always PugAlNash.

PACKER ROLLED the wad of leaf across his tongue, sucking out the last faded dregs of its tantalizing flavor.

If a man could make a deal for a good-sized shipment of the leaf, he thought, he could make a fortune on it. Packaged in small units, like packs of gum, it would go like hot cakes here on Earth. He had tried to bring up the subject with Pug, but had done no more than confuse and perplex the good Unukian who, for some unfathomable reason, could not conceive of any commerce that went beyond the confines of simple barter to meet the personal needs of the bargaining individuals.

The doorbell chimed and Packer went to answer it.

It was Tony Camper.

"Hi, Uncle Clyde," said Tony breezily.

Packer held the door open grudgingly.

"Since you are here," he said, "you might as well come in."

Tony stepped in and tilted his hat back on his head. He looked the apartment over with an appraising eye.

"Some day, Unk," he said, "you should get this place shoveled out. I don't see how you stand it."

"I manage it quite well,"

Packer informed him tartly. "Some day I'll get around to straightening up a bit."

"I should hope you do," said Tony.

"My boy," said Packer, with a trace of pride, "I think that I can say, without fear of contradiction, that I have one of the finest collections of out-star stamps that anyone can boast. Some day, when I get them all in albums—"

"You'll never make it, Unk. It'll just keep piling up. It comes in faster than you can sort it out."

He reached out a foot and nudged the bag beside the desk.

"Like this," he said. "This is a new one, isn't it?"

"It just came in," admitted Packer. "Haven't gotten around as yet to figuring out exactly where it's from."

"Well, that is fine," said Tony. "Keep on having fun. You'll outlive us all."

"Sure, I will," said Packer testily. "What is it that you want?"

"Not a thing, Unk. Just dropped in to say hello and to remind you you're coming up to Hudson's to spend the week-end with us. Ann insisted that I drop around and nudge you. The kids have been counting the days—"

"I would have remembered it," lied Packer, who had quite forgotten it.

"I could drop around and

pick you up. Three this afternoon?"

"No, Tony, don't bother. I'll catch a stratocab. I couldn't leave that early. I have things to do."

"I bet you have," said Tony. He moved toward the door.

"You won't forget," he cautioned.

"No, of course I won't," snapped Packer.

"Ann would be plenty sore if you did. She's fixing everything you like."

Packer grunted at him.

"Dinner at seven," said Tony cheerfully.

"Sure, Tony. I'll be there."

"See you, Unk," said Tony, and was gone.

YOUNG WHIPPERSNAPPER, Packer told himself. Wonder what he's up to now. Always got a new deal cooking, never quite making out on it. Just keeps scraping along.

He stumped back to the desk.

Figures he'll be getting my money when I die, he thought. The little that I have. Well, I'll fool him. I'll spend every cent of it. I'll manage to live long enough for that.

He sat down and picked up one of the letters, slit it open with his pocket knife and dumped out its contents on the one small bare spot on the desk in front of him.

He snapped on the desk lamp

and pulled it close. He bent above the stamps.

Pretty fair lot, he thought. That one there from Rho Geminiorum XII, or was it XVI, was a fine example of the modern classic—designed with delicacy and imagination, engraved with loving care and exactitude, laid on paper of the highest quality, printed with the highest technical precision.

He hunted for his stamp tongs and failed to find them. He opened the desk drawer and rummaged through the tangled rat's-nest he found inside it. He got down on his hands and knees and searched beneath the desk.

He didn't find the tongs.

He got back, puffing, into his chair, and sat there angrily.

Always losing tongs, he thought. I bet this is the twentieth pair I've lost. Just can't keep track of them, damn 'em!

The door chimed.

"Well, come on in!" Packer yelled in wrath.

A mouselike little man came in and closed the door gently behind him. He stood timidly just inside, twirling his hat between his hands.

"You Mr. Packer, sir?"

"Yes, sure I am," yelled Packer. "Who did you expect to find here?"

"Well, sir," said the man, advancing a few careful steps into the room, "I am Jason Pickering.

You may have heard of me."

"Pickering?" said Packer. "Pickering? Oh, sure, I've heard of you. You're the one who specializes in Polaris."

"That is right," admitted Pickering, mincing just a little. "I am gratified that you—"

"Not at all," said Packer, getting up to shake his hand. "I'm the one who's honored."

He bent and swept two albums and three shoe boxes off a chair. One of the shoe boxes tipped over and a mound of stamps poured out.

"Please have a chair, Mr. Pickering," Packer said majestically.

Pickering, his eyes popping slightly, sat down gingerly on the edge of the swept-clean chair.

"My, my," he said, his eyes taking in the litter that filled the apartment, "you seem to have a lot of stuff here. Undoubtedly, however, you can lay your hands on anything you want."

"Not a chance," said Packer, sitting down again. "I have no idea whatsoever what I have."

Pickering tittered. "Then, sir, you may well be in for some wonderful surprises."

"I'm never surprised at anything," said Packer loftily.

"Well, on to business," said Pickering. "I do not mean to waste your time. I was wondering if it were possible you might have Polaris 17b on cover. It's

quite an elusive number, even off cover, and I know of not a single instance of one that's tied to cover. But someone was telling me that perhaps you might have one tucked away."

"Let me see, now," said Packer. He leaned back in his chair and leafed catalogue pages rapidly through his mind. And suddenly he had it—Polaris 17b—a tiny stamp, almost a midget stamp, bright blue with a tiny crimson dot in the lower left-hand corner and its design a mass of lacy scrollwork.

"Yes," he said, opening his eyes, "I believe I may have one. I seem to remember, years ago . . ."

Pickering leaned forward, hardly breathing.

"You mean you actually . . ."

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," said Packer, waving his hand vaguely at the room.

"If you find it," offered Pickering, "I'll pay ten thousand for it."

"A strip of five," said Packer, "as I remember it. Out of Polaris VII to Betelgeuse XIII by way of—I don't seem to remember by way of where."

"A strip of five!"

"As I remember it. I might be mistaken."

"Fifty thousand," said Pickering, practically frothing at the mouth. "Fifty thousand, if you find it."

Packer yawned. "For only fifty thousand, Mr. Pickering, I wouldn't even look."

"A hundred, then."

"I might think about it."

"You'll start looking right away? You must have some idea."

"Mr. Pickering, it has taken me all of twenty years to pile up all the litter that you see and my memory's not too good. I'd have not the slightest notion where to start."

"Set your price," urged Pickering. "What do you want for it?"

"If I find it," said Packer, "I might consider a quarter million. That is, if I find it . . ."

"You'll look?"

"I'm not sure. Some day I might stumble on it. Some day I'll have to clean up the place. I'll keep an eye out for it."

Pickering stood up stiffly.

"You jest with me," he said.

Packer waved a feeble hand. "I never jest," he said.

Pickering moved toward the door.

Packer heaved himself from the chair.

"I'll let you out," he said.

"Never mind. And thank you very much."

Packer eased himself back into the chair and watched the man go out.

He sat there, trying to remember where the Polaris cover might

be buried. And finally gave up. It had been so long ago.

He hunted some more for the tongs, but he didn't find them.

He'd have to go out first thing in the morning and buy another pair. Then he remembered that he wouldn't be here in the morning. He'd be up on Hudson's Bay, at Tony's summer place.

It did beat hell, he thought, how he could manage to lose so many tongs.

He sat for a long time, letting himself sink into a sort of suspended state, not quite asleep, nor yet entirely awake, and he thought, quite vaguely and disjointedly, of many curious things.

But mostly about adhesive postage stamps and how, of all the ideas exported by the Earth, the idea of the use of stamps had caught on most quickly and, in the last two thousand years, had spread to the far corners of the galaxy.

It was getting hard, he told himself, to keep track of all the stamps, even of the planets that were issuing stamps. There were new ones popping up all the blessed time. A man must keep everlastingly on his toes to keep tab on all of them.

There were some funny stamps, he thought. Like the ones from Menkalinen that used smells to spell out their values. Not five-cent stamps or five-dollar

stamps or hundred-dollar stamps, but one stamp that smelled something like a pasture rose for the local mail and another stamp that had the odor of ripe old cheese for the system mail and yet another with a stink that could knock out a human at forty paces distance for the interstellar service.

And the Algeiban issues that shifted into colors beyond the range of human vision—and worst of all, with the values based on that very shift of color. And that famous classic issue put out, quite illegally, of course, by the Leonidian pirates who had used, instead of paper, the well-tanned, thin-scraped hides of human victims who had fallen in their clutches.

He sat nodding in the chair, listening to a clock hidden somewhere behind the litter of the room, ticking loudly in the silence.

It made a good life, he told himself, a very satisfactory life. Twenty years ago when Myra had died and he had sold his interest in the export company, he'd been ready to curl up and end it all, ready to write off his life as one already lived. But today, he thought, he was more absorbed in stamps than he'd ever been in the export business and it was a blessing—that was what it was, a blessing.

He sat there and thought kind-

ly of his stamps, which had rescued him from the deep wells of loneliness, which had given back his life and almost made him young again.

And then he fell asleep.

THE DOOR CHIMES wakened him and he stumbled to the door, rubbing sleep out of his eyes.

The Widow Foshay stood in the hall, with a small kettle in her hands. She held it out to him.

"I thought, poor man, he will enjoy this," she said. "It's some of the beef broth that I made. And I always make so much. It's so hard to cook for one."

Packer took the kettle.

"It was kind of you," he mumbled.

She looked at him sharply.

"You are sick," she said.

She stepped through the door, forcing him to step back, forcing her way in.

"Not sick," he protested limply. "I fell asleep, that's all. There's nothing wrong with me."

She reached out a pudgy hand and held it on his forehead.

"You have a fever," she declared. "You are burning up."

"There's nothing wrong with me," he bellowed. "I tell you, I just fell asleep, is all."

She turned and hustled out into the room, threading her way among the piled-up litter. Watching her, he thought: My God, she finally got into the place!

How can I throw her out?

"You come over here and sit right down," she ordered him. "I don't suppose you have a thermometer."

He shook his head, defeated.

"Never had any need of one," he said. "Been healthy all my life."

She screamed and jumped and whirled around and headed for the door at an awkward gallop. She stumbled across a pile of boxes and fell flat upon her face, then scrambled, screeching, to her feet and shot out of the door.

Packer slammed the door behind her and stood looking, with some fascination, at the kettle in his hand. Despite all the ruckus, he'd spilled not a single drop.

But what had caused the Widow . . .

Then he saw it—a tiny mouse running on the floor.

He hoisted the kettle in a grave salute.

"Thanks, my friend," he said.

He made his way to the table in the dining room and found a place where he could put down the kettle.

Mice, he thought. There had been times when he had suspected that he had them—nibbled cheese on the kitchen shelf, scurryings in the night—and he had worried some about them making nests in the material he had stacked all about the place.

But mice had a good side to

them, too, he thought.

He looked at his watch and it was almost five o'clock and he had an hour or so before he had to catch a cab and he realized now that somehow he had managed to miss lunch. So he'd have some of the broth and while he was doing that he'd look over the material that was in the bag.

He lifted some of the piled-up boxes off the table and set them on the floor so he had some room to empty the contents of the bag.

He went to the kitchen and got a spoon and sampled the broth. It was more than passing good. It was still warm and he had no doubt that the kettle might do the finish of the table top no good, but that was something one need not worry over.

He hauled the bag over to the table and puzzled out the strangeness of the return address. It was the new script they'd started using a few years back out in the Bootis system and it was from a rather shady gentle-being from one of the Cygnian stars who appreciated, every now and then, a case of the finest Scotch.

Packer, hefting the bag, made a mental note to ship him two, at least.

He opened up the bag and upended it and a mound of covers flowed out on the table.

Packer tossed the bag into a corner and sat down contentedly. He sipped at the broth and began

going slowly through the pile of covers. They were, by and large, magnificent. Someone had taken the trouble to try to segregate them according to systems of their origin and had arranged them in little packets, held in place by rubber bands.

There was a packet from Rasal-hague and another from Cheleb and from Nunki and Kaus Borealis and from many other places.

And there was a packet of others he did not recognize at all. It was a fairly good-sized packet with twenty-five or thirty covers in it and all the envelopes, he saw, were franked with the same stamps—little yellow fellows that had no discernible markings on them—just squares of yellow paper, rather thick and rough. He ran his thumb across one and he got the sense of crumbling, as if the paper were soft and chalky and were abrading beneath the pressure of his thumb.

Fascinated, he pulled one envelope from beneath the rubber band and tossed the rest of the packet to one side.

He shambled to his desk and dug frantically in the drawer and came back with a glass. He held it above the stamp and peered through it and he had been right—there were no markings on the stamp. It was a mere yellow square of paper that was rather thick and pebbly, as if it were made up of tiny grains of sand.

He straightened up and spooned broth into his mouth and frantically flipped the pages of his mental catalogue, but he got no clue. So far as he could recall, he'd never seen or heard of that particular stamp before.

He examined the postmarks with the glass and some of them he could recognize and there were others that he couldn't, but that made no difference, for he could look them up, at a later time, in one of the postmark and cancellation handbooks. He got the distinct impression, however, that the planet, or planets, of origin must lie Libra-wards, for all the postmarks he could recognize trended in that direction.

He laid the glass away and turned his full attention to the broth, being careful of his whiskers. Whiskers, he reminded himself, were no excuse for one to be a sloppy eater.

The spoon turned in his hand at that very moment and some of the broth spilled down his beard and some spattered on the table, but the most of it landed on the cover with the yellow stamp.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tried to wipe the cover clean, but it wouldn't wipe. The envelope was soggy and the stamp was ruined with the grease and he said a few choice cuss-words, directed at his clumsiness.

Then he took the dripping cover by one corner and hunted

until he found the wastebasket and dropped the cover in it.

CHAPTER II

HE WAS GLAD to get back from the weekend at Hudson's Bay.

Tony was a fool, he thought, to sink so much money in such a fancy place. He had no more prospects than a rabbit and his high-pressure deals always seemed to peter out, but he still went on talking big and hung onto that expensive summer place. Maybe, Packer thought, that was the way to do it these days; maybe if you could fool someone into thinking you were big, you might have a better chance of getting into something big. Maybe that was the way it worked, but he didn't know.

He stopped in the lobby to pick up his mail, hoping there might be a package from Pug AlNash. In the excitement of leaving for the weekend, he'd forgotten to take along the box of leaf and three days without it had impressed upon him how much he had come to rely upon it. Remembering how low his supply was getting, he became a little jittery to think that more might not be forthcoming.

There was a batch of letters, but no box from Pug.

And he might have known, he told himself, that there wouldn't

be, for the box never came until he was entirely out. At first, he recalled, he wondered by what prophetic insight Pug might have known when the leaf was gone, how he could have gauged the shipping time to have it arrive exactly when there was need of it. But now he no longer thought about it, for it was one of those unbelievable things it does no good to think about.

"Glad to have you back," the clerk told him cheerfully. "You had a good weekend, Mr. Packer?"

"Tolerable," growled Packer, grumpily, heading for the lift.

Before he reached it, he was apprehended by Elmer Lang, the manager of the building.

"Mr. Packer," he whinnied, "I'd like to talk to you."

"Well, go ahead and talk."

"It's about the mice, Mr. Packer."

"What mice?"

"Mrs. Foshay tells me there are mice in your apartment."

Packer drew himself up to the fullness of his rather dumpy height.

"They are your mice, Lang," he said. "You get rid of them."

Lang wrung his hands. "But how can I, Mr. Packer? It's the way you keep your place. All that litter in there. You've got to clean it up."

"That litter, I'll have you know, sir, is probably one of the



most unique stamp collections in the entire galaxy. I've gotten behind a little in keeping it together, true, but I will not have you call it litter."

"I could have Miles, the caretaker, help you get it straightened out."

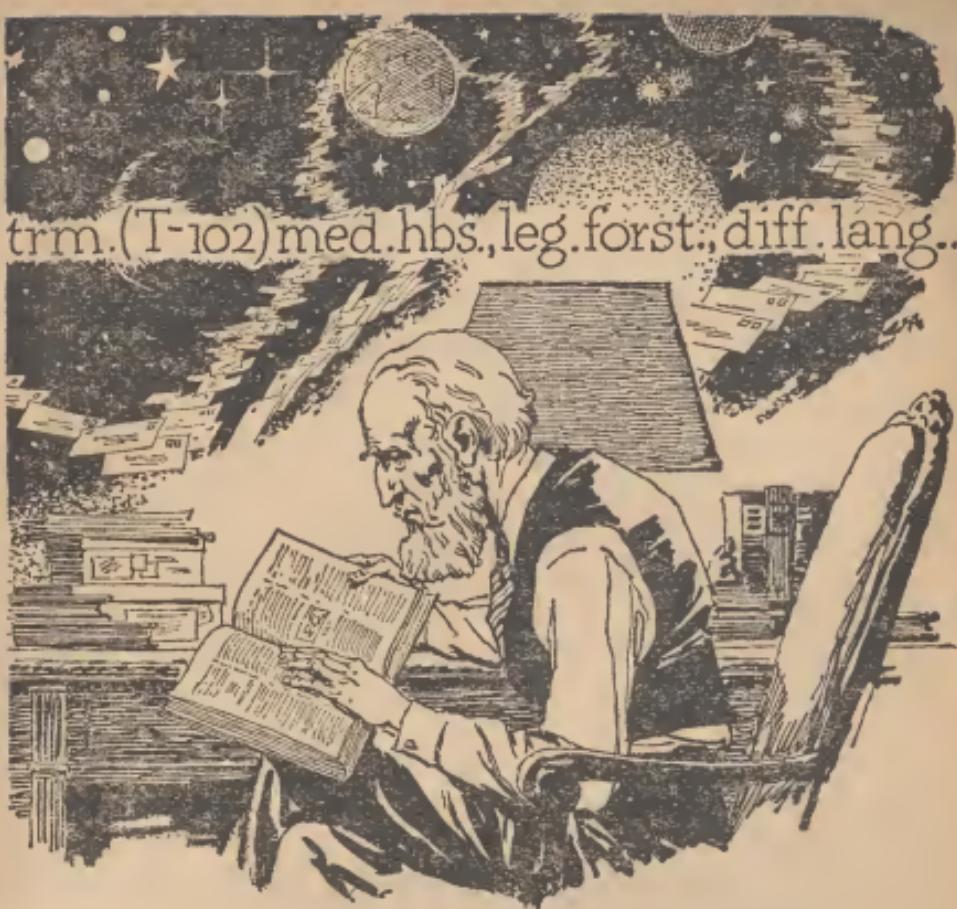
"I tell you, sir," said Packer, "the only one who could help me is one trained in philately. Does your caretaker happen to be—"

"But, Mr. Packer," Lang pleaded, "all that paper and all those boxes are nesting places for them. I can do nothing about the mice unless I can get in there and get some of it cleared away."

"Cleared away!" exploded Packer. "Do you realize, sir, what

you are talking of? Somewhere, hidden in that vast stock of material is a certain cover—to you, sir, an envelope with stamps and postmarks on it—for which I have been offered a quarter million dollars if I ever turn it up. And that is one small piece of all the material I have there. I ask you, Lang, is that the sort of stuff that you clear away?"

"But, Mr. Packer, I cannot



allow it to go on. I must insist—”

The lift arrived and Packer stalked into it haughtily, leaving the manager standing in the lobby, twisting at his hands.

Packer whuffed his mustache at the operator.

“Busybody,” he said.

“What was that, sir?”

“Mrs. Foshay, my man. She’s a busybody.”

“I do believe,” said the oper-

ator judiciously, “that you may be entirely right.”

Packer hoped the corridor would be empty and it was. He unlocked his door and stepped inside.

A bubbling noise stopped him in his tracks.

He stood listening, unbelieving, just a little frightened.

The bubbling noise went on and on.

HE STEPPED cautiously out into the room and as he did he saw it.

The wastebasket beside the desk was full of a bubbling yellow stuff that in several places had run down the sides and formed puddles on the floor.

Packer stalked the basket, half prepared to turn and run.

But nothing happened. The yellowness in the basket simply kept on bubbling.

It was a rather thick and gooey mess, not frothy, and the bubbling was no more than a noise that it was making, for in the strict sense of the word, he saw, it was not bubbling.

Packer sidled closer and thrust out a hand toward the basket. It did not snap at him. It paid no attention to him.

He poked a finger at it and the stuff was fairly solid and slightly warm and he got the distinct impression that it was alive.

And immediately he thought of the broth-soaked cover he had thrown in the basket. It was not so unusual that he should think of it, for the yellow of the brew within the basket was the exact color of the stamp upon the cover.

He walked around the desk and dropped the mail he'd picked up in the lobby. He sat down ponderously in the massive office chair.

So a stamp had come to life,

he thought, and that certainly was a queer one. But no more queer, perhaps, than the properties of many other stamps, for while Earth had exported the idea of their use, a number of peculiar adaptations of the idea had evolved.

And now, he thought a little limply, I'll have to get this mess in the basket out of here before Lang comes busting in.

He worried a bit about what Lang had said about cleaning up the place and he got slightly sore about it, for he paid good money for these diggings and he paid promptly in advance and he was never any bother. And besides, he'd been here for twenty years and Lang should consider that.

He finally got up from the chair and lumbered around the desk. He bent and grasped the wastebasket, being careful to miss the places where the yellow goo had run down the sides. He tried to lift it and the basket did not move. He tugged as hard as he could pull and the basket stayed exactly where it was. He squared off and aimed a kick at it and the basket didn't budge.

He stood off a ways and glared at it, with his whiskers bristling. As if he didn't have all the trouble that he needed, without this basket deal! Somehow or other, he was going to have to get the apartment straightened out and get rid of the mice. He should be

looking for the Polaris cover. And he'd lost or mislaid his tongs and would have to waste his time going out to get another pair.

But first of all, he'd have to get this basket out of here. Somehow it had become stuck to the floor—maybe some of the yellow goo had run underneath the edge of it and dried. Maybe if he had a pinch bar or some sort of lever that he could jab beneath it, he could pry it loose.

From the basket the yellow stuff made merry bubbling noises at him.

He clapped his hat back on his head and went out and slammed and locked the door behind him.

IT WAS a fine summer day and he walked around a little, trying to run his many problems through his mind, but no matter what he thought of, he always came back to the basket brimming with the yellow mess and he knew he'd never be able to get started on any of the other tasks until he got rid of it.

So he hunted up a hardware store and bought a good-sized pinch bar and headed back for the apartment house. The bar, he knew, might mark up the floor somewhat, but if he could get under the edge of the basket with a bar that size he was sure that he could pry it loose.

In the lobby, Lang descended on him.

"Mr. Packer," he said sternly, "where are you going with that bar?"

"I went out and bought it to exterminate the mice."

"But, Mr. Packer—"

"You want to get rid of those mice, don't you?"

"Why, certainly I do."

"It's a desperate situation," Packer told him gravely, "and one that may require very desperate measures."

"But that bar!"

"I'll exercise my best discretion," Packer promised him. "I shall hit them easy."

He went up the lift with the bar. The sight of Lang's discomfiture made him feel a little better and he managed to whistle a snatch of tune as he went down the hall.

As he fumbled with the key, he heard the sound of rustling coming from beyond the door and he felt a chill go through him, for the rustlings were of a furtive sort and they sounded ominous.

Good Lord, he thought, there can't be that many mice in there!

He grasped the bar more firmly and unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The inside of the place was a storm of paper.

He stepped in quickly and slammed the door behind him to keep the blowing paper from swooping out into the hall.

Must have left a window open, he thought. But he knew he had not, and even if he had, it was quiet outside. There was not a breath of breeze.

And what was happening inside the apartment was more than just a breeze.

He stood with his back against the door and watched what was going on and shifted his grip on the bar so that it made a better club.

The apartment was filled with a sleet of flying paper and a barrage of packets and a snowstorm of dancing stamps. There were open boxes standing on the floor and the paper and the stamps and packets were drifting down and chunking into these, and along the wall were other boxes, very neatly piled—and that was entirely wrong, for there had been nothing neat about the place when he had left it less than two hours before.

But even as he watched, the activity slacked off. There was less stuff flying through the air and some of the boxes were closed by unseen hands and then flew off, all by themselves, to stack themselves with the other boxes.

Poltergeists! he thought in terror, his mind scrambling back frantically over all that he had ever thought or read or heard to grasp some explanation.

Then it was done and over.

There was nothing flying through the air. All the boxes had been stacked. Everything was still.

Packer stepped out into the room and stared in slack-jawed amazement.

The desk and the tables shone. The drapes hung straight and clean. The carpeting looked as if it might be new. Chairs and small tables and lamps and other things, long forgotten, buried all these years beneath the accumulation of his collection, stood revealed and shining —dusted, cleaned and polished.

And in the middle of all this righteous order stood the wastebasket, bubbling happily.

Packer dropped the bar and headed for the desk.

In front of him a window flapped open and he heard a swish and the bar went past him, flying for the window. It went out the window and slashed through the foliage of a tree, then the window closed and he lost sight of it.

Packer took off his hat and tossed it on the desk.

Immediately his hat lifted from the desk and sailed for a closet door. The closet door swung open and the hat ducked in. The door closed gently on it.

Packer whuffled through his whiskers. He got out his handkerchief and mopped a glistening brow.

"Funny goings-on," he said to himself.

SLOWLY, cautiously, he checked the place. All the boxes were stacked along one wall, three deep and piled from floor to ceiling. Three filing cabinets stood along another wall and he rubbed his eyes at that, for he had forgotten that there were three of them—for years he'd thought that he had only two. And all the rest of the place was neat and clean and it fairly gleamed.

He walked from room to room and everywhere it was the same.

In the kitchen the pots and pans were all in place and the dishes stacked primly in the cupboard. The stove and refrigerator had been wiped clean and there were no dirty dishes and that was a bit surprising, for he was sure there had been. Mrs. Foshay's kettle, with the broth emptied out of it and scrubbed until it shone, stood on the kitchen table.

He went back to the desk and the top of it was clear except for several items laid out, as if for his attention:

Ten dead mice.

Eight pairs of stamp tongs.

The packet of covers with the strange yellow stamps.

Two—not one—but two covers, one bearing a strip of four and the other a strip of five Polaris 17b.

Packer sat down heavily in his chair and stared at the items on the desk.

How in the world, he wondered—how had it come about? What was going on?

He peeked around the desk edge at the bubbling basket and it seemed to chortle at him.

It was, he told himself, it *must be* the basket—or rather, the stuff within the basket. Nothing else had been changed, no other factor had been added. The only thing new and different in the apartment was the basket of yellow gook.

He picked up the packet of covers with the yellow stamps affixed and opened the drawer to find a glass. The drawer was arranged with startling neatness and there were five glasses lying in a row. He chose the strongest one.

Beneath the glass the surface of the stamps became a field made up of tiny ball-like particles, unlike the grains of sand which the weaker glass he had used before had shown.

He bent above the desk, with his eye glued to the glass, and he knew that what he was looking at were spores.

Encysted, lifeless, they still would carry life within them, and that had been what had happened here. He'd spilled the broth upon the stamp and the spores had come to life—a strange alien

community of life that seethed within the basket.

He put the glass back in the drawer and rose. He gathered up the dead mice carefully by their tails. He carried them to the incinerator shaft and let them drop.

He crossed the room to the bookcases and the books were arranged in order and in sequence and there, finally, were books that he'd lost years ago and hunted ever since. There were long rows of stamp catalogues, the set of handbooks on galactic cancellations, the massive list of postmarks, the galactic travel guides, the long row of weird language dictionaries, indispensable in alien stamp identification, and a number of technical works on philatelic subjects.

From the bookcase he moved to the piled-up boxes. One of them he lifted down. It was filled with covers, with glassine envelopes of loose stamps, with sheets, with blocks and strips. He dug through the contents avidly, with wonder mounting in him.

All the stamps, all the covers, were from the Thuban system.

He closed the box and bent to lift it back. It didn't wait for him. It lifted by itself and fitted itself in place.

He looked at three more boxes. One contained, exclusively, material from Korephoros, and another material from Antares and the third from Dschubba. Not

only had the litter been picked up and boxed and piled into some order, but the material itself had been roughly classified!

He went back to the chair and sat down a little weakly. It was too much, he thought, for a man to take.

The spores had fed upon the broth and had come to life, and within the basket was an alien life form or a community of life forms. And they possessed a passion for orderliness and a zest for work and an ability to channel that zest into useful channels.

And what was more, the things within the basket did what a man wanted done.

It had straightened up the apartment, it had classified the stamps and covers, it had killed the mice, it had located the Polaris covers and had found the missing tongs.

And how had it known that he wanted these things done? Read his mind, perhaps?

He shivered at the thought, but the fact remained that it had done absolutely nothing except bubble merrily away until he had returned. It had done nothing, perhaps, because it did not know what to do—until he had somehow told it what to do. For as soon as he had returned, it had found out what to do and did it.

THE DOOR CHIMED and he got up to answer.

It was Tony.

"Hi, Unk," he said. "You forgot your pajamas and I brought them back. You left them on the bed and forgot to pack them."

He held out a package and it wasn't until then that he saw the room.

"Unk!" he yelled. "What happened? You got the place cleaned up!"

Packer shook his head in bewilderment. "Something funny, Tony."

Tony walked in and stared around in admiration and astonishment.

"You sure did a job," he said.

"I didn't do it, Tony."

"Oh, I see. You hired someone to do it while you were up at our place."

"No, not that. It was done this morning. It was done by that!"

He pointed at the basket.

"You're crazy, Unk," said Tony, firmly. "You have flipped your thatch."

"Maybe so," said Packer. "But the basket did the work."

Tony walked around the basket warily. He reached down and punched the yellow stuff with a stuck-out finger.

"It feels like dough," he announced.

He straightened up and looked at Packer.

"You aren't kidding me?" he asked.

"I don't know what it is," said

Packer. "I don't know why or how it did it, but I'm telling you the truth."

"Unk," said Tony, "we may have something here!"

"There is no doubt of that."

"No, that's not what I mean. This may be the biggest thing that ever happened. This junk, you say, will really work for you?"

"Somehow or other," said Packer. "I don't know how it does it. It has a sense of order and it does the work you want. It seems to understand you—it anticipates whatever you want done. Maybe it's a brain with enormous psi powers. I was looking at a cover the other night and I saw this yellow stamp . . ."

Packer told him swiftly what had happened.

Tony listened thoughtfully, pulling at his chin.

"Well, all right, Unk," he said, "we've got it. We don't know what it is or how it works, but let's put our thinking into gear. Just imagine a bucket of this stuff standing in an office—a great big, busy office. It would make for efficiency such as you never saw before. It would file all the papers and keep the records straight and keep the entire business strictly up to date. There'd never be anything ever lost again. Everything would be right where it was supposed to be and could be located in a second. When the boss or some-

one else should want a certain file—bingo! it would be upon his desk. Why, an office with one of these little buckets could get rid of all its file clerks. A public library could be run efficiently without any personnel at all. But it would be in big business offices—in insurance firms and industrial concerns and transportation companies—where it would be worth the most."

Packer shook his head, a bit confused. "It might be all right, Tony. It might work the way you say. But who would believe you? Who would pay attention? It's just too fantastic. They would laugh at you."

"You leave that all to me," said Tony. "That's my end of the business. That's where I come in."

"Oh," said Packer, "so we're in business now."

"I have a friend," said Tony, who always had a friend, "who'd let me try it out. We could put a bucket of this stuff in his office and see how it works out."

He looked around, suddenly all business.

"You got a bucket, Unk?"

"Out in the kitchen. You'd find something there."

"And beef broth. It was beef broth, wasn't it?"

Packer nodded. "I think I have a can of it."

Tony stood and scratched his head. "Now let's get this figured

out, Unk. What we want is a sure source of supply."

"I have those other covers. They all have stamps on them. We could start a new batch with one of them."

Tony gestured impatiently. "No, that wouldn't do. They are our reserves. We lock them tight away against emergency. I have a hunch that we can grow bucket after bucket of the stuff from what we have right here. Pull off a handful of it and feed it a shot of broth—"

"But how do you know—"

"Unk," said Tony, "doesn't it strike you a little funny that you had the exact number of spores in that one stamp, the correct amount of broth, to grow just one basket full?"

"Well, sure, but . . ."

"Look, this stuff is intelligent. It knows what it is doing. It lays down rules for itself to live by. It's got a sense of order and it lives by order. So you give it a wastebasket to live in and it lives within the limits of that basket. It gets just level with the top; it lets a little run down the sides to cement the basket tight to the floor. And that is all. It doesn't run all over. It doesn't fill the room. It has some discipline."

"Well, maybe you are right, but that still doesn't answer the question—"

"Just a second, Unk. Watch here."

Tony plunged his hand into the basket and came out with a chunk of the spore-growth ripped loose from the parent body.

"Now, watch the basket, Unk," he said.

They watched. Swiftly the spores surged and heaved to fill the space where the ripped-out chunk had been. Once again the basket was very neatly filled.

"You see what I mean?" said Tony. "Given more living room, it will grow. All we got to do is feed it so it can. And we'll give it living room. We'll give it a lot of buckets, so it can grow to its heart's content and—"

"Damn it, Tony, will you listen to me? I been trying to ask you what we're going to do to keep it from cementing itself to the floor. If we start another batch of it, it will cement its bucket or its basket or whatever it is in to the floor just like this first one did."

"I'm glad you brought that up," said Tony. "I know just what to do. We will hang it up. We'll hang up the bucket and there won't be any floor."

"Well," said Packer, "I guess that covers it. I'll go heat up that broth."

THEY HEATED the broth and found a bucket and hung it on a broomstick suspended between two chairs.

They dropped the chunk of

spore-growth in and watched it and it stayed just as it was.

"My hunch was right," said Tony. "It needs some of that broth to get it started."

He poured in some broth and the spores melted before their very eyes into a black and ropy scum.

"There's something wrong," said Tony, worriedly.

"I guess there is," said Packer.

"I got an idea, Unk. You might have used a different brand of broth. There might be some difference in the ingredients. It may not be the broth itself, but some ingredient in it that gives this stuff the shot in the arm it needs. We might be using the wrong broth."

Packer shuffled uncomfortably.

"I don't remember, Tony."

"You have to!" Tony yelled at him. "Think, Unk! You got to—you have to remember what brand it was you used."

Packer whuffled out his whiskers unhappily.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Tony, it wasn't boughten broth. Mrs. Foshay made it."

"Now we're getting somewhere! Who is Mrs. Foshay?"

"She's a nosy old dame who lives across the hall."

"Well, that's just fine. All you have to do is ask her to make some more for you."

"I can't do it, Tony."

"All we'd need is one batch,

Unk. We could have it analyzed and find out what is in it. Then we'd be all set."

"She'd want to know why I wanted it. And she'd tell all over how I asked for it. She might even figure out there was something funny going on."

"We can't have that," exclaimed Tony in alarm. "This is our secret, Unk. We can't cut in anyone."

He sat and thought.

"Anyhow, she's probably sore at me," said Packer. "She sneaked in the other day and got the hell scared out of her when a mouse ran across the floor. She tore down to the management about it and tried to make me trouble."

Tony snapped his fingers.

"I got it!" he cried. "I know just how we'll work it. You go on and get in bed—"

"I will not!" snarled Packer.

"Now listen, Unk, you have to play along. You have to do your part."

"I don't like it," protested Packer. "I don't like any part of it."

"You get in bed," insisted Tony, "and look the worst you can. Pretend you're suffering. I'll go over to this Mrs. Foshay and I'll tell her how upset you were over that mouse scaring her. I'll say you worked all day to get the place cleaned up just because of that. I'll say you worked so known it was to be so bad,

"You'll do no such thing," yelped Packer. "She'll come tearing in here. I won't have that woman—"

"You want to make a couple billion, don't you?" asked Tony angrily.

"I don't care particularly," Packer told him. "I can't somehow get my heart in it."

"I'll tell this woman that you are all tuckered out and that your heart is not so good and the only thing you want is another bowl of broth."

"You'll tell her no such thing," raved Packer. "You'll leave her out of this."

"Now, Unk," Tony reasoned with him, "if you won't do it for yourself, do it for me—me, the only kin you have in the entire world. It's the first big thing I've ever had a chance at. I may talk a lot and try to look prosperous and successful, but I tell you, Unk . . ."

He saw he was getting nowhere.

"Well, if you won't do it for me, do it for Ann, do it for the kids. You wouldn't want to see those poor little kids—"

"Oh, shut up," said Packer. "First thing you know, you'll be blubbering. All right, then, I'll do it."

IT WAS WORSE than he had thought it would be. If he had known it was to be so bad, he'd

he'd never have consented to go through with it.

The Widow Foshay brought the bowl of broth herself. She sat on the bed and held his head up and cooed and crooned at him as she fed him broth.

It was most embarrassing.

But they got what they were after.

When she had finished feeding him, there was still half a bowl of broth and she left that with them because, she said, poor man, he might be needing it.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS three o'clock in the afternoon and almost time for the Widow Foshay to come in with the broth.

Thinking of it, Packer gagged a little.

Someday, he promised himself, he'd beat Tony's brains out. If it hadn't been for him, this never would have started.

Almost six months now and every blessed day she had brought the broth and sat and talked with him while he forced down a bowl of it. And the worst of it, Packer told himself, was that he had to pretend that he thought that it was good.

And she was so gay! Why did she have to be so gay? Toujours gai, he thought. Just like the crazy alley cat that ancient writer had penned the silly lines about.

Garlic in the broth, he thought —my God, who'd ever heard of garlic in beef broth! It was uncivilized. A special recipe, she'd said, and it was all of that. And yet it had been the garlic that had done the job with the yellow spore-life—it was the food needed by the spores to kick them into life and to start them growing.

Although the garlic in the broth might have been good for him as well, he admitted to himself, for in many years, it seemed, he had not felt so fine. There was a spring in his step, he'd noticed, and he didn't get so tired; he used to take a nap of an afternoon and now he never did. He worked as much as ever, actually more than ever, and he was, except for the widow and the broth; a very happy man. Yes, a very happy man.

He would continue to be happy, he told himself, as long as Tony left him to his stamps. Let the little whippersnapper carry the load of Efficiency, Inc.; he was, after all, the one who had insisted on it. Although, to give him credit, he had done well with it. A lot of industries had signed up and a whole raft of insurance companies and a bunch of bond houses and a good scattering of other lines of business. Before long, Tony said, there wouldn't be a business anywhere that would dare to try to get

along without the services of Efficiency, Inc.

The doorbell chimed and he went to answer it. It would be the Widow Foshay, and she would have her hands full with the broth.

But it was not the widow.

"Are you Mr. Clyde Packer?" asked the man who stood in the hall.

"Yes, sir," Packer said. "Will you please step in?"

"My name is John Griffin," said the man, after he was seated. "I represent Geneva."

"Geneva? You mean the government?"

The man showed him credentials.

"O.K.," said Packer a bit frostily, being no great admirer of the government. "What can I do for you?"

"You are senior partner in Efficiency, Inc., I believe."

"I guess that's what I am."

"Mr. Packer, don't you know?"

"Well, I'm not positive. I'm a partner, but I don't know about this senior business. Tony runs the show and I let him have his head."

"You and your nephew are sole owners of the firm?"

"You bet your boots we are. We kept it for ourselves. We took no one in with us."

"Mr. Packer, for some time the government has been attempting to negotiate with Mr. Camper.

He's told you nothing of it?"

"Not a thing," said Packer. "I'm busy with my stamps. He doesn't bother me."

"We have been interested in your service," Griffin said. "We have tried to buy it."

"It's for sale," said Packer. "You just pay the price and—"

"But you don't understand. Mr. Camper insists on a separate contract for every single office that we operate. That would run to a terrific figure—"

"Worth it," Packer assured him. "Every cent of it."

"It's unfair," said Griffin firmly. "We are willing to buy it on a departmental basis and we feel that even in that case we would be making some concession. By rights the government should be allowed to come in under a single covering arrangement."

"Look," protested Packer, "what are you talking to me for? I don't run the business; Tony does. You'll have to deal with him. I have faith in the boy. He has a good hard business head. I'm not even interested in Efficiency. All I'm interested in is stamps."

"That's just the point," said Griffin heartily. "You've hit the situation exactly on the head."

"Come again?" asked Packer.

"Well, it's like this," Griffin told him in confidential tones. "The government gets a lot of

stamps in its daily correspondence. I forget the figure, but it runs to several tons of philatelic material every day. And from every planet in the galaxy. We have in the past been disposing of it to several stamp concerns, but there's a disposition in certain quarters to offer the whole lot as a package deal at a most attractive price."

"That is fine," said Packer, "but what would I do with several tons a day?"

"I wouldn't know," declared Griffin, "but since you are so interested in stamps, it would give you a splendid opportunity to have first crack at a batch of top-notch material. It is, I dare say, one of the best sources you could find."

"And you'd sell all this stuff to me if I put in a word for you with Tony?"

Griffin grinned happily. "You follow me exactly, Mr. Packer."

Packer snorted. "Follow you! I'm way ahead of you."

"Now, now," cautioned Griffin, "you must not get the wrong impression. This is a business offer—a purely business offer."

"I suppose you'd expect no more than nominal payment for all this waste paper I would be taking off your hands."

"Very nominal," said Griffin.

"All right, I'll think about it and I'll let you know. I can't promise you a thing, of course."

"I understand, Mr. Packer. I do not mean to rush you."

AFTER GRIFFIN LEFT, Packer sat and thought about it and the more he thought about it, the more attractive it became.

He could rent a warehouse and install an Efficiency Basket in it and all he'd have to do would be to dump all that junk in there and the basket would sort it out for him.

He wasn't exactly sure if one basket would have the time to break the selection down to more than just planetary groupings, but if one basket couldn't do it, he could install a second one and between the two of them, he could run the classification down to any point he wished. And then, after the baskets had sorted out the more select items for his personal inspection, he could set up an organization to sell the rest of it in job lots and he could afford to sell it at a figure that would run all the rest of those crummy dealers clear out on the limb.

He rubbed his hands together in a gesture of considerable satisfaction, thinking how he could make it rough for all those skin-flint dealers. It was murder, he reminded himself, what they got away with; anything that happened to them, they had coming to them.

But there was one thing he

gagged on slightly. What Griffin had offered him was little better than a bribe, although it was, he supposed, no more than one could expect of the government. The entire governmental structure was loaded with grafters and ten percenters and lobbyists and special interest boys and others of their ilk. Probably no one would think a thing of it if he made the stamp deal—except the dealers, of course, and there was absolutely nothing they could do about it except to sit and howl.

But aside from that, he wondered, did he have the right to interfere with Tony? He could mention it to him, of course, and Tony would say yes. But did he have the right?

HE SAT and worried at the question, without reaching a conclusion, without getting any nearer to the answer, until the door chimes sounded.

It was the Widow Foshay and she was empty-handed. She had no broth today.

"Good afternoon," he said. "You are a little late."

"I was just opening my door to come over when I saw you had a caller. He's gone now, isn't he?"

"For some time," said Packer.

She stepped inside and he closed the door. They walked across the room.

"Mr. Packer," said the Widow,

"I must apologize. I brought no broth today. The truth of the matter is, I'm tired of making it all the time."

"In such a case," he said, very gallantly, "the treats will be on me."

He opened the desk drawer and lifted out the brand new box of PugAlNash's leaf, which had arrived only the day before.

Almost reverently, he lifted the cover and held the box out to her. She recoiled from it a little.

"Go ahead," he urged. "Take a pinch of it. Don't swallow it. Just chew it."

Cautiously, she dipped her fingers in the box.

"That's too much," he warned her. "Just a little pinch. You don't need a lot. And it's rather hard to come by."

She took a pinch and put it in her mouth.

He watched her closely, smiling. She looked for all the world as if she had taken poison. But soon she settled back in her chair, apparently convinced it was not some lethal trick.

"I don't believe," she said, "I've ever tasted anything quite like it."

"You never have. Other than myself, you may well be the only human that has ever tasted it. I get it from a friend of mine who lives on one of the far-out stars. His name is PugAlNash and he

sends it regularly. And he always includes a note."

He looked in the drawer and found the latest note.

"Listen to this," he said.

He read it:

*Der Fiend: Grately injoid lat-
ter smoke you cent me. Ples mor
of sam agin. You du knot no that
I profetick and wach abed for
you. Butt it be so and I grately
hapy to perform this taske for
fiend. I assur you it be onely four
the beste. You prophet grately,
maybee.*

*Your living fiend,
PugAlNash*

He finished reading it and tossed it on the desk.

"What do you make of it?" he asked. "Especially that crack about his being a prophet and watching ahead for me?"

"It must be all right," the widow said. "He claims you will profit greatly."

"He sounds like a gypsy fortune-teller. He had me worried for a while."

"But why should you worry over that?"

"Because I don't want to know what's going to happen to me. And sometime he might tell me. If a man could look ahead, for example, he'd know just when he was going to die and how and all the—"

"Mr. Packer," she told him, "I don't think you're meant to

die. I swear you are getting to look younger every day."

"As a matter of fact," said Packer, vastly pleased, "I'm feeling the best I have in years."

"It may be that leaf he sends you."

"No, I think most likely it is that broth of yours."

They spent a pleasant afternoon—more pleasant, Packer admitted, than he would have thought was possible.

And after she had left, he asked himself another question that had him somewhat frightened.

Why in the world, of all people in the world, had he shared the leaf with her?

HE PUT the box back in the drawer and picked up the note. He smoothed it out and read it once again.

The spelling brought a slight smile to his lips, but he quickly turned it off, for despite the atrociousness of it, PugAlNash nevertheless was one score up on him. For Pug had been able, after a fashion, to master the language of the Earth, while he had bogged down completely when confronted with Pug's language.

*I profetick and wach abed for
you.*

It was crazy, he told himself. It was, perhaps, some sort of joke, the kind of thing that passed for a joke with Pug.

He put the note away and prowled the apartment restlessly, vaguely upset by the whole pile-up of worries.

What should he do about the Griffin offer?

Why had he shared the leaf with the Widow Foshay?

What about that crack of Pug's?

He went to the bookshelves and put out a finger and ran it along the massive set of *Galactic Abstracts*. He found the right volume and took it back to the desk with him.

He leafed through it until he found *Unuk al Hay*. Pug, he remembered, lived on planet X of the system.

He ran his finger down the fine print until he came to X.

He wrinkled up his forehead as he puzzled out the meaning of the compact, condensed, sometimes cryptic wording, bristling with fantastic abbreviations. It was a bloated nuisance, but it made sense, of course. There was just too much information to cover in the galaxy—the set of books, unwieldy as it might be, would simply become unmanageable if anything like completeness of expression and description were attempted.

X—*lt.kn., int., uninb. hu., (T-67), tr. intrm. (T-102) med. bbs., leg. forst., diff. lang...*

Wait a second, there!

Leg. forst.

Could that be *legend of foresight*?

He read it again, translating as he went:

X—*little known, intelligence, uninhabitable for humans (see table 67), trade by intermediaries (see table 102), medical herbs, legend (or legacy?) of foresight, difficult language...*

And that last one certainly was right. He'd gained a working knowledge of a lot of alien tongues, but with Pug's he could not even get an inkling.

Leg. forst.?

One couldn't be sure, but it could be—it could be!

He slapped the book shut and took it back to the shelf.

So you watch ahead for me, he said.

And why? To what purpose?

PugAlNash, he said, a little pleased, someday I'll wring your scrawny, meddling neck.

But, of course, he wouldn't. PugAlNash was too far away and he might not be scrawny and there was no reason to believe he even had a neck.

CHAPTER IV

WHEN BEDTIME came around, he got into his flame-red pajamas with the yellow parrots on them and sat on the edge of the bed, wiggling his toes.

It had been quite a day, he thought.

He'd have to talk with Tony about this government offer to sell him the stamp material. Perhaps, he thought, he should insist upon it even if it meant a loss of possible revenue to Efficiency, Inc. He might as well get what he could and what he wanted when it was for the taking. For Tony, before they were through with it, probably would beat him out of what he had coming to him. He had expected it by now—but more than likely Tony had been too busy to indulge in any crookedness. Although it was a wonder, for Tony enjoyed a dishonest dollar twice as much as he did an honest one.

He remembered that he had told Griffin that he had faith in Tony and he guessed that he'd been right—he had faith in him and a little pride as well. Tony was an unprincipled rascal and there was no denying that. Thinking about it, Packer chuckled fondly. Just like me, he told himself, when I was young as Tony and was still in business.

There had been that triple deal with the bogus Chippendale and the Antarian paintings and the local version of moonshine from out in the Packrat system. By God, he told himself, I skinned all three of them on that one.

The phone rang and he padded out of the bedroom, his bare feet slapping on the floor.

The phone kept on insisting.

"All right!" yelled Packer angrily. "I'm coming!"

He reached the desk and picked up the phone.

"This is Pickering," said the voice.

"Pickering. Oh, sure. Glad to hear from you."

And had not the least idea who Pickering might be.

"The man you talked with about the Polaris cover."

"Yes, Pickering. I remember you."

"I wonder, did you ever find that cover?"

"Yes, I found it. Sorry, but the strip had only four. I told you five, I fear. An awful memory, but you know how it goes. A man gets old and—"

"Mr. Packer, will you sell that cover?"

"Sell it? Yes, I guess I told you that I would. Man of my word, you realize, although I regret it now."

"It's a fine one, then?"

"Mr. Pickering," said Packer, "considering that it's the only one in existence—"

"Could I come over to see it sometime soon?"

"Any time you wish. Any time at all."

"You will hold it for me?"

"Certainly," consented Packer. "After all, no one knows as yet that I have the thing."

"And the price?"

"Well, now, I told you a quar-

ter million, but I was talking then about a strip of five. Since it's only four, I'd be willing to shave it some. I'm a reasonable man, Mr. Pickering. Not difficult to deal with."

"I can see you aren't," said Pickering with a trace of bitterness.

They said good night and Packer sat in the chair and put his bare feet up on the desk and wiggled his toes, watching them with a certain fascination, as if he had never seen them before.

He'd sell Pickering the four-strip cover for two hundred thousand. Then he'd let it get noised about that there was a five-strip cover, and once he heard that, Pickering would be beside himself and frothing at the mouth. He'd be afraid that someone might get ahead of him and buy the five-stamp strip while he had only four. And that would be a public humiliation that a collector of Pickering's stripe simply couldn't stand.

Packer chortled softly to himself.

"Bait," he said aloud.

He probably could get half a million out of that five-strip piece. He'd make Pickering pay for it. He'd have to start it high, of course, and let Pickering beat him down.

HE LOOKED at the clock upon the desk and it was ten o'clock—

a good hour past his usual bed-time.

He wiggled his toes some more and watched them. Funny thing about it, he wasn't even sleepy. He didn't want to go to bed; he'd got undressed from simple force of habit.

Nine o'clock, he thought, is a hell of a time for a man to go to bed. He could remember a time when he had never turned in until well after midnight and there had been many certain memorable occasions, he chucklingly recalled, when he'd not gone to bed at all.

But there had been something to do in those days. There had been places to go and people to meet and food had tasted proper and the liquor had been something a man looked forward to. They didn't make decent liquor these days, he told himself. And there were no great cooks any more. And no entertainment, none worthy of the name. All his friends had either died or scattered; none of them had lasted.

Nothing lasts, he thought.

He sat wiggling his toes and looking at the clock and somehow he was beginning to feel just a bit excited, although he could not imagine why.

In the silence of the room there were two sounds only—the soft ticking of the clock and the syrupy gurgling of the basket full of spores.

He leaned around the corner of the desk and looked at the basket and it was there, four-square and solid—a basketful of fantasy come to sudden and enduring life.

Someday, he thought, someone would find where the spores came from—what distant planet in what misty reaches out toward the rim of the thinning galaxy. Perhaps even now the origin of the stamps could be determined if he'd only release the data that he had, if he would show the covers with the yellow stamps to some authority. But the covers and the data were a trade secret and had become too valuable to be shown to anyone and they were tucked away deep inside a bank vault.

Intelligent spores, he mused—what a perfect medium for the carrying of the mail. You put a dab of them on a letter or a package and you told them, somehow or other, where the letter or the package was to go and they would take it there. And once the job was done, then the spores encysted until the day that someone else, or something else, should recall them to their labors.

And today they were laboring for the Earth and the day would come, perhaps, when they'd be housekeepers to the entire Earth. They'd run all businesses efficiently and keep all homes picked up and neat; they would clean

the streets and keep them free of litter and introduce everywhere an era of such order and such cleanliness as no race had ever known.

He wiggled his toes and looked at the clock again. It was not ten-thirty yet and it was really early. Perhaps he should change his mind—perhaps he should dress again and go for a moonlight stroll. For there was a moon; he could see it through the window.

Damn old fool, he told himself, whuffling out his whiskers.

But he took his feet down off the desk and paddled toward the bedroom.

HE CHUCKLED as he went, planning exactly how he was going to skin Pickering to within an inch of that collector's parsimonious life.

He was bending at the mirror, trying to make his tie track when the doorbell set up a clamor.

If it was Pickering, he thought, he'd throw the damn fool out. Imagine turning up at this time of night to do a piece of business that could better wait till morning.

It wasn't Pickering.

The man's card said he was W. Frederick Hazlitt and that he was president of the Hazlitt Suppliers Corporation.

"Well, Mr. Hazlitt?"

"I'd like to talk to you a min-

ute," Hazlitt said, peering furtively around. "You're sure that we're alone here?"

"Quite alone," said Packer.

"This is a matter of some delicacy," Hazlitt told him, "and of some alarm as well. I came to you rather than Mr. Anton Camper because I know of you by reputation as a man of proven business sagacity. I feel you could understand the problem where Mr. Camper—"

"Fire away," invited Packer cordially.

He had a feeling that he was going to enjoy this. The man was obviously upset and scared to death as well.

Hazlitt hunched forward in his chair and his voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"Mr. Packer," he confided in stricken horror, "I am becoming honest!"

"That's too bad," said Packer sympathetically.

"Yes, it is," said Hazlitt soberly. "A man in my position—in any business connection—simply can't be honest. Mr. Packer, I'll tell you confidentially that I lost out on one of the biggest deals in all my business life just last week because I had grown honest."

"Maybe," Packer suggested, "if you persevered, if you set your heart on it, you could remain at least partially dishonest."

Hazlitt shook his head doleful-

ly. "I tell you, sir, I can't. I've tried. You don't know how hard I've tried. And no matter how I try, I find myself telling the truth about everything. I find that I cannot take unfair advantage of anyone, not even of a customer. I even found myself the other day engaged in cutting my profit margins down to a more realistic figure—"

"Why, that's horrible!" cried Packer.

"And it's all your fault," yelled Hazlitt.

"My fault," protested Packer, whuffling out his whiskers. "Upon my word, Mr. Hazlitt, I can't see how you can say a thing like that. I've had not a thing to do with it."

"It's your Efficiency units," howled Hazlitt. "They're the cause of it."

"The Efficiency units have nothing to do with you," declared Packer angrily. "All they do . . ."

He stopped.

Good Lord, he thought, they could!

He'd been feeling better than he'd felt for years and he didn't need his nap of an afternoon and here he was, dressing to go out in the middle of the night!

"How long has this been going on?" he asked in growing horror.

"For a month at least," said Hazlitt. "I think I first noticed it a month or six weeks ago."

"Why didn't you simply heave the unit out?"

"I did," yelled Hazlitt, "but it did no good."

"I don't understand. If you threw it out that should be the end of it."

"That's what I thought at the time, myself. But I was wrong. That yellow stuff's still there. It's growing in the cracks and floating in the air and you can't get rid of it. Once you have it, you are stuck with it."

Packer clucked in sympathy.

"You could move, perhaps."

"Do you realize what that would cost me, Packer? And besides, so far as I'm concerned, it simply is no good. The stuff's inside of me!"

He pounded at his chest. "I can feel it here, inside of me—turning me honest, making a good man out of me, making me orderly and efficient, just like it made our files. And I don't want to be a good man, Packer—I want to make a lot of money!"

"There's one consolation," Packer told him. "Whatever is happening to you undoubtedly also is happening to your competitors."

"But even if that were the case," protested Hazlitt, "it would be no fun. What do you think a man goes into business for? To render service, to become identified with the commercial community, to make money only?

No, sir, I tell you—it's the thrill of skinning a competitor, of running the risk of losing your own shirt, of—"

"Amen," said Packer loudly.

Hazlitt stared at him. "You, too . . ."

"Not a chance," said Packer proudly. "I'm every bit as big a rascal as I ever was."

Hazlitt settled back into his chair. His voice took on an edge, grew a trifle cold.

"I had considered exposing you, warning the world, and then I saw I couldn't . . ."

"Of course you can't," said Packer gruffly. "You don't enjoy being laughed at. You are the kind of man who can't stand the thought of being laughed at."

"What's your game, Packer?"

"My game?"

"You introduced the stuff. You must have known what it would do. And yet you say you are unaffected by it. What are you shooting at—gobbling up the entire planet?"

Packer whuffled. "I hadn't thought of it," he said. "But it's a capital idea."

He rose stiffly to his feet. "Little old for it," he said, "but I have a few years yet. And I'm in the best of fettle. Haven't felt—"

"You were going out," said Hazlitt, rising. "I'll not detain you."

"I thank you, sir," said Packer.

"I noticed that there was a moon and I was going for a stroll. You wouldn't join me, would you?"

"I have more important things to do, Packer, than strolling in the moonlight."

"I have no doubt of that," said Packer, bowing slightly. "You would, of course, an upright, honest business man like you."

Hazlitt slammed the door as he went out.

PACKER PADDED back to the bedroom, took up the tie again.

Hazlitt an honest man, he thought. And how many other honest men this night? And a year from now—how many honest men in the whole wide world just one year from now? How long before the entire Earth would be an honest Earth? With spores lurking in the cracks and floating in the air and running with the rivers, it might not take so long.

Maybe that was the reason Tony hadn't skinned him yet. Maybe Tony was getting honest, too. Too bad, thought Packer, gravely. Tony wouldn't be half as interesting if he should happen to turn honest.

And the government? A government that had come begging for the spores—begging to be honest, although to be completely fair one must admit the government as yet did not know about the honesty.

That was a hot one, Packer told himself. An honest government! And it would serve those stinkers right! He could see the looks upon their faces.

He gave up the business of the tie and sat down on the bed and shook for minutes with rumbling belly laughter.

At last he wiped the tears out of his eyes and finished with the tie.

Tomorrow morning, bright and early, he'd get in touch with Griffin and arrange the package deal for the stamp material. He'd act greedy and drive a hard bargain and then, in the end, pay a bit more than the price agreed upon for a long-term arrangement. An honest government, he told himself, would be too honest to rescind such an agreement even if, in the light of its new honesty, it should realize the wrongness of it. For, happily, one of the tenets of honesty was to stay stuck with a bad bargain, no matter how arrived at.

He shucked into his jacket and went into the living room. He stopped at the desk and opened the drawer. Reaching in, he lifted the lid of the box of leaf. He took a pinch and had it halfway to his mouth when the thought struck him suddenly and he stood for a moment frozen while all the gears came together, meshing, and the pieces fell into a pattern and he knew, without even ask-

ing, why he was the only genuine dishonest man left on the entire Earth.

I profetick and wach abed for you!

He put the leaf into his mouth and felt the comfort of it.

Antidote, he thought, and knew that he was right.

But how could Pug have known—how could he have foreseen the long, twisting tangle of many circumstances which must inevitably crystallize into this very moment?

Leg. forst.?

He closed the lid of the box and shut the drawer and turned toward the door.

The only dishonest man in the world, he thought. Immune to the honesty factor in the yellow spores because of the resistance built up within him by his long use of the leaf.

He had set a trap tonight to victimize Pickering and tomorrow he'd go out and fox the government and there was no telling where he'd go from there. Hazlitt had said something about taking over the entire planet and the idea was not a bad one if he could only squeeze out the necessary time.

He chuckled at the thought of how all the honest suckers would stand innocently in line, unable to do a thing about it—all fair

prey to the one dishonest man in the entire world. A wolf among the sheep!

He drew himself erect and pulled the white gloves on carefully. He flicked his walking stick. Then he thumped himself on the chest—just once—and let himself out into the hall. He did not bother to lock the door behind him.

In the lobby, as he stepped out of the lift, he saw the Widow Foshay coming in the door. She turned and called back cheerfully to friends who had brought her home.

He lifted his hat to her with an olden courtesy that he thought he had forgotten.

She threw up her hands in mock surprise. "Mr. Packer," she cried, "what has come over you? Where do you think you're going at this time of night, when all honest people are abed?"

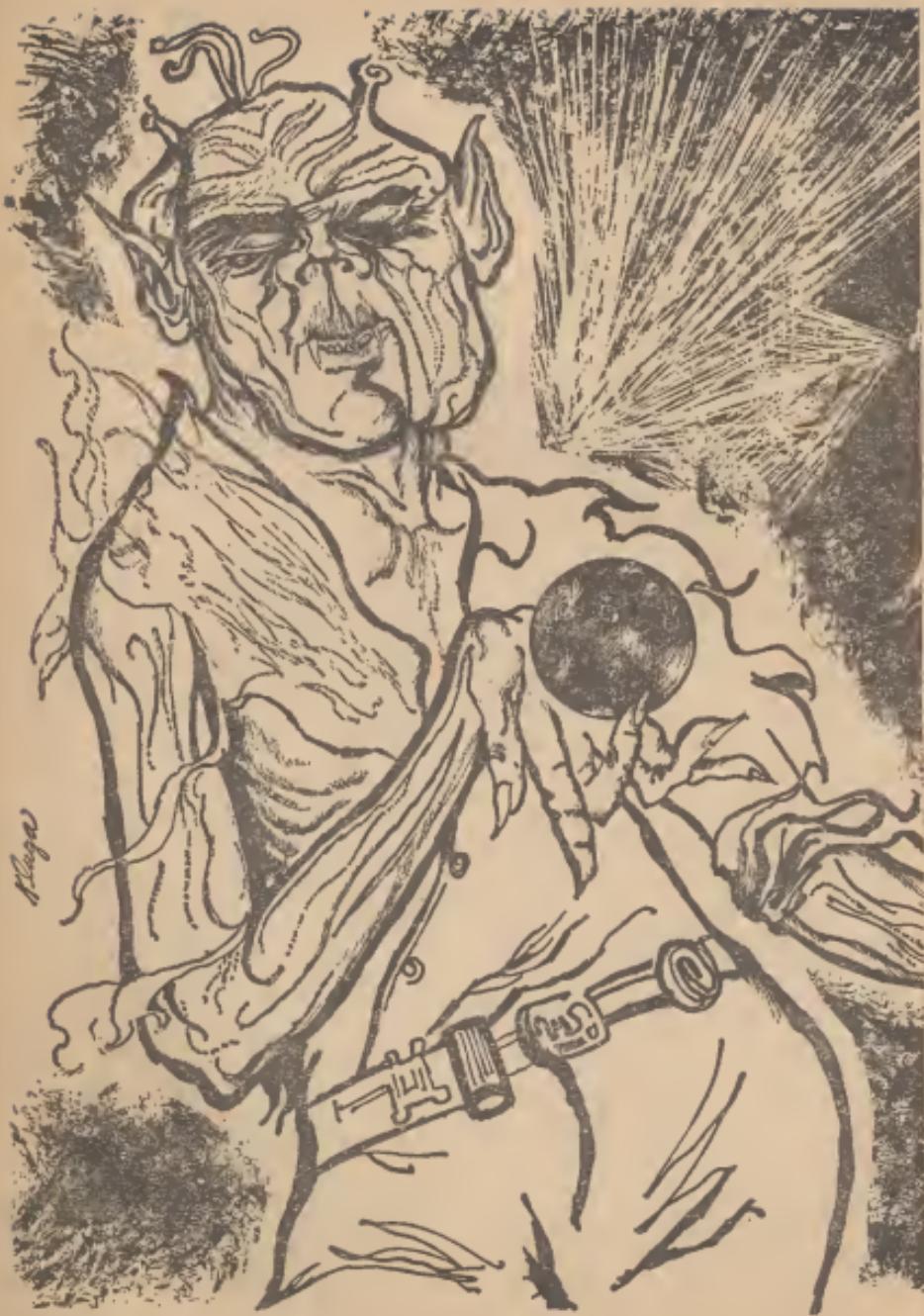
"Minerva," he told her gravely, "I was about to take a stroll. I wonder if you might come along with me?"

She hesitated for an instant, just long enough to give the desired small show of reluctance and indecision.

He whuffled out his mustache at her. "Besides," he said, "I am not an honest person."

He offered her his arm with distinguished gallantry.

oo oo oo





THE BEAST of BOREDOM

By RICHARD R. SMITH

*It wasn't a weapon or a bribe, as
he thought. But it was the
most ingenious trap of all time!*

Illustrated by RICHARD KLUGA

THE SHACK at the edge of the dead canal was so carefully camouflaged, he almost passed by it. Hoping he hadn't been seen, he dropped to his stomach and crawled through the mud toward the door.

It wasn't a long distance, but inching his way on his elbows and knees, and with his face close to the evil-smelling mud, it seemed like a mile. As he crawled, he reflected bitterly that most of mankind's really great achieve-

ments always ended in war. Columbus had crossed the Atlantic Ocean and it had ended in war with the Indians. Mankind had invented atomic energy and then used it to kill millions. Their latest achievement was the marvel of spaceflight and where had that ended? It had also ended in war. . . .

Personally, he didn't believe they were justified in fighting the Martians. If they didn't want anyone intruding on their planet, what right did Earthmen have to force their way? The popular theory that they could help rebuild the dying Martian civilization didn't seem very logical when millions had to be killed in the process. And if Martians were an independent race and wanted to sit around and watch their civilization crumble, why shouldn't they have that privilege?

When he was within a few yards of the door, he set aside his philosophical thoughts. Leaping to his feet, he ran into the small shack and screamed shrilly in the manner designed to momentarily paralyze an enemy with fear.

He raised the rifle instinctively when something moved in the shadows, and as his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he felt a queasiness in his stomach. The emaciated alien who cowered in the shadows resembled a pitiful

bundle of rags more than an enemy!

Trembling hands lifted an object and three things happened so rapidly that they seemed to happen simultaneously: the Martian's bony fingers moved over the object; a burning sensation ripped through his brain; he realized it must be a weapon and squeezed the trigger of his rifle.

When the sharp crack stopped echoing in his ears, he examined the still form and discovered he'd been mistaken. The object wasn't a weapon. It was a metal globe six inches in diameter and studded with precious jewels. The Martian had offered it in exchange for his life.

THE WINDOWS of his apartment on the fourteenth floor were open and a gentle breeze chilled the sweat on his face as he worked with the knife. He had previously removed four jewels from the metal globe, but the large ruby he'd selected this time seemed to be embedded deeper.

The blade slipped and slashed the palm of his left hand. Cursing the artifact and all Martians in general, he attacked the ruby furiously and grunted with satisfaction when he dislodged it.

The red jewel rolled across the table and fell to the floor. Picking it up gingerly as if it were a fragile thing of glass, he held it in the sunlight and watched

the myriad facets sparkle like a one-color kaleidoscope. It was the largest jewel of all and worth a small fortune. . . .

A sharp pain in his hand reminded him of his wound and he went to the bathroom. After carefully washing the cut, he applied iodine and was trying to find a bandage when . . .

The ruby rolled across the table and fell to the floor.

Startled, he leaped back and upset the chair. A second before, he'd been in the bathroom and now he was at the table! Amnesia? He couldn't remember walking back to the living room and although he thought he'd put iodine on the cut, there was none on it that he could see.

He went to the bathroom . . .

The ruby rolled across the table and fell to the floor.

He was sitting before the table again without any memory of having left the bathroom! It had happened twice.

Taking the globe to the window, he examined it carefully and saw that where the ruby had been lodged, there was now an opening through the metal. When he held it at a certain angle, he saw a maze of wiring and tiny mechanisms inside.

He had fought the Martians for two years. He had traveled across their red deserts, crawled

on the muddy bottoms of their gigantic dead canals, walked through the remains of their ancient cities and heard legends about the great Martian empire that had slowly crumbled during the centuries.

He remembered the legends about Martian time machines and he accepted the fact readily: the object in his hand was a time trap. An ancient, intricate, scientific booby-trap!

The Martian had known he would die and had deliberately planned his revenge. Perhaps the machine wasn't strong enough to take anyone far into the past or future; that would explain why he hadn't used it to escape. But it was evidently strong enough to be used as a trap, and perhaps it had even been designed for that purpose centuries ago. Removing the ruby had triggered it. . . .

Ironic, he reflected, that he'd gone to so much trouble and expense to smuggle the thing from Mars to Earth. The jewels were worth a fortune and it had never occurred to him that the metal globe might have some *function*. Actually, he had smuggled an ingenious death-trap back to Earth with him.

He shuddered at the thought.

The ruby rolled across the table and . . .

He was once again sitting be-

fore the Martian artifact, his eyes once again focussed on the ruby as it rolled across the table. Like something in a magician's act, he had disappeared from his position near the window and reappeared in the chair. As before, the cut on his hand stung painfully, but this time he ignored it and kept his eyes focussed on his wrist watch.

It was eleven forty-five eastern standard time.

The ruby rolled across the table . . .

His eyes were no longer focussed on the watch, but he remembered that the hands had last indicated eleven fifty-five. And now they were back at *eleven forty-five*. He was trapped in a period of time only ten minutes long!

He lit a cigarette with trembling fingers and tried to think calmly. What danger was there in a time trap? He felt no physical pain and so far the trap had only caused him small inconveniences. Anything he did during the ten-minute period was magically undone when he was thrown backward in time. He had put iodine on the cut on his hand and it had disappeared. He had walked to the window, but at the beginning of the next cycle, without any conscious sensation, he found himself sitting in the chair once more. But how

could movement through time harm him?

And was he the only one aware of the trap?

He turned the television set on and watched a news announcer during several following cycles. Before long, he was convinced that he was the only one who was aware of the repeated time interval. The news announcer represented everyone in the world, and if he were conscious of the fact that he'd read the same news more than a dozen times, there would have been *some* change in his expression!

He recalled how the Martian had moved his fingers over the globe and how he'd felt a burning sensation inside his skull. The device had evidently been adjusted to his neural pattern so that only he was conscious of the trap. Or else only someone within a certain effective radius—fifty feet, for instance—was conscious of the repeated time intervals.

Although he'd always believed the stories about the time machines and he now had proof of their existence, he still found it difficult to comprehend their operation. He had heard that such a machine concentrated on only a few atoms of a radioactive substance. By drawing energy from the space-time continuum itself, the machine succeeded in thrusting those atoms backward

or forward in time, and since that affected the entire probability stream, all physical matter was forced to follow them through the time stream.

He couldn't totally comprehend the concept, but he realized he had to do *something* nevertheless, and during following cycles that totaled hours, he tried to decide on a course of action. He recalled the Martian legend about how a particularly vicious criminal had been punished with a similar machine. The unfortunate had been tossed into a pit filled with lionlike animals and then, by repeating the time interval, he had been made to suffer the same death a thousand times. In his own case, he was in no physical danger, but he knew that an enemy was creeping toward him . . . an enemy that could kill him as surely as any lion . . . *boredom*.

If he submitted to boredom and just sat through the endless time cycles, it would be the same as sitting in a room for weeks, months, or years. That would be the same as solitary confinement and would eventually drive him insane.

So, there were two possibilities: he could attempt to wreck the machine or wait for it to wear itself out and fight boredom while waiting.

It didn't take him long to decide that he should wait for the

machine to run down. If the alien devices really drew energy from the space-time continuum, it would be dangerous to tamper with one. A wrong move when fooling with such a tremendous amount of energy might be disastrous, and perhaps that was exactly what the old Martian had planned for him to do! On the other hand, it didn't seem possible that a machine could run forever.

There should be plenty of ways to keep himself occupied and his mind busy while he waited. . . .

He began reading the magazines scattered about the apartment. There was only time to read a few pages, but he mentally noted the page number during each cycle and when the succeeding interval began, he opened the magazine to that exact page and continued. . . .

The ruby rolled across the table and . . .

The preceding cycles seemed like an eternity when he looked back upon them. He had read every magazine from cover to cover, watched every television program and listened to every radio program countless times until he had them memorized word for word. He had worked the crossword puzzles in the newspaper several times and explored every square inch of the apartment.

He had no more ideas so he tried to sleep. . . .

HE KNEW it was useless: during each ten-minute interval, he had time to walk from the chair to the davenport, close his eyes and relax his body. But then, at the moment when he was about to fall asleep, he would always find himself in the tediously familiar chair.

He hoped he would grow tired and be able to fall asleep, but finally realized it was impossible. Since the machine influenced the space-time continuum and the same ten-minute interval in time was always repeated, all physical things in space were exactly as they had been at the beginning of the cycle. His body had been refreshed at the beginning of the original cycle and it would always be in the same condition. He would never grow older, he would never become hungry and he would never become tired *physically*.

DESPERATE for a way to overcome boredom, he used the bottle of whiskey in the kitchen. After several attempts, he discovered to his dismay that there were ways to get violently sick from gulping liquor but no possible way to get drunk in ten minutes!

He sat through endless cycles staring at the empty air; began to have wild thoughts and knew

he was on the verge of insanity. And if he were losing the fight with boredom, he might as well try the other alternative: break the machine and hope it wouldn't blow up in his face.

Taking a long-bladed knife, he attacked the small mechanisms inside the globe. He probed, twisted and jabbed but they seemed indestructible.

Furious, he held it underwater with the hope that water would short-circuit "electrical contacts" if there were any.

When that didn't work, he beat it with a hammer, kicked it, threw it about the room and as a last result, dropped it from the window.

It bounced off the sidewalk fourteen floors below and attracted attention, but a few minutes later he was once more sitting in the chair and watching the sickeningly familiar ruby as it rolled across the sickeningly familiar table.

He stared at the telephone. If only it would ring; if only someone would call him and break the *monotony*! But that was impossible. At the beginning of each cycle, all physical things and events were exactly as they had been. . . .

Telephone!

He could use it to break the monotony—he could phone all his friends!

He telephoned all his friends

and talked with them for numerous ten-minute intervals that totaled days. Because they were always unaware of the previous cycles, his repeated phone calls never annoyed them. Sometimes he told them about the time trap but it was beyond their comprehension and they always thought he was drunk, so he learned not to mention it.

When he tired of talking to his friends, he started at the front of the telephone directory and began calling every name. He made dates with girls he'd never seen, memorized marvelous sales talks and sold non-existent vacuum cleaners and cars. Sometimes he pretended to be the master of ceremonies on a quiz program and when someone answered a difficult question, he told them they had just won a dollar. The various reactions he received were amusing and broke the monotony, but after a few days, even that became boring.

He tried to leave the hotel's fourteenth floor, but discovered that the elevator boy was not on the job at that particular time. Although he ran to the elevator at the beginning of numerous cycles and pushed the *down* button, the indicator needle never moved during the ten minutes.

He used the stairs at the end of the corridor with the hope of reaching another floor and meeting someone. To see someone or

speak to someone in person would have done a lot to break the monotony, but he found that the thirteenth and fifteenth floors were inaccessible. The doors that led to them from the stairway wouldn't push in and there was no hand-grip to pull them outward. Evidently the hotel management used the method to prevent burglars from having an absurdly easy and unseen access to the apartments. Anyone could leave a floor and use the stairs to reach the hotel lobby, but anyone wishing to go from the lobby to a certain floor or from one floor to another was forced to use the elevator.

Cursing the bad luck, he sat for hours and wondered what he could do. He was restricted to succeeding but separate and identical time intervals, and that was also a physical restriction in effect: ten minutes wasn't long enough to leave that floor of the hotel.

HE NOW THOUGHT of boredom as an ugly monster that lurked everywhere about him and waited . . . waited to seize him with sharp teeth of inactivity. . . .

Desperate for the sight of another person, he tried to enter the other apartments. There were five on that floor, but of them, only the one next to his own seemed to be occupied. When he knocked, there was no answer,

but he pressed an ear against the door and heard the faint sound of running water. Whoever the occupant was, he or she was taking a shower and couldn't hear him no matter how hard he knocked.

It irritated him because the apartment was so close. If he could contact the person somehow, he or she could be reached at the beginning of each cycle and would be a tangible individual to help him fight boredom—not a voice on the telephone, an image on the TV screen or a tiny dot of a person fourteen floors below his window.

By phoning the hotel desk, he learned that a woman named Mary Jeffers rented apartment 1403, and he found her telephone number in the directory.

Dialing the number, he was relieved when she answered within a few minutes. The ringing of the phone was evidently loud enough to penetrate the noise of the shower while his knocking on the door hadn't been.

"Mary Jeffers?" he asked.

"Yes?"

"Mary, are you a college graduate?"

"Yes. Who is this? Why do you want to know?"

"This is the police. It's very important. Which college did you attend?"

He knew it was a flimsy trick

to get information, but he caught her off guard and she answered, "The University of Delaware."

He hung up the phone and waited until the next cycle. Dialing the number again, he said, "Mary? This is Harry Ogden."

Because of the nature of the time trap, she was unaware of the previous conversation, and her automatic reply to the unfamiliar voice was, "Ogden? You must have the wrong number. I don't know anyone by that name."

"Don't you remember? I went to the University of Delaware with you. I remember you. You have blonde hair and—"

"No. It's blonde."

Hanging up the phone, he waited until the next cycle, dialed the number again and said, "Mary? This is Harry Ogden."

"Ogden? You must have the wrong number. I don't know anyone by that name."

"Don't you remember? I went to the University of Delaware with you. I remember you. You're a blonde about a hundred and thirty pounds and—"

"Well, not quite that much."

By calling dozens of times, he used the system to learn more and more about Mary Jeffers, until at last he knew enough to convince her within a few minutes that he was a friend from her college days whom she'd forgotten.

As he talked with her during various cycles that totaled weeks, he began to feel as if she *were* a friend, and the desire to see her in person increased. The sight of anyone would have done wonders to break the monotony, and she was the only possibility since all the other apartments were empty.

"I have the apartment next to yours," he said during one time cycle. "Can I come over?"

"I'm not dressed," she replied. "I was taking a shower. Give me time to get dressed."

He glanced at his watch and saw that only four minutes remained in that cycle. He realized despairingly that there wasn't time for her to get dressed. All his efforts had been in vain: ten minutes wasn't long enough to phone her, go through the carefully memorized routine convincing her he was an old friend, wait for her to dress and open the door of her apartment.

It couldn't be done in ten minutes!

BOREDOM was like a hungry beast that breathed in his ears with a roar of silence while he sat through several succeeding cycles.

Silence. It seemed to echo in his ears as he looked about the apartment. It seemed to whisper that he was losing the duel. The Martian's trap was working: he would sit and wait, and think,

and think endlessly until they were wild thoughts and he was insane. And then, the Martian would have his revenge, for insanity was a form of walking death. . . .

He made a decision. He had fought boredom legally and exhausted every method he could think of. If there were no more legal ways, then he would fight boredom *illegally*. The police couldn't reach him in ten minutes no matter what he did.

Dialing Mary Jeffers' phone number at the beginning of the next cycle, he laid the receiver on the desk, ran across the room and climbed through the window.

The stone ledge just beneath his window wasn't very wide, but by inching his way along it, he reached the open window of apartment 1403.

Climbing through the window, he saw that Mary Jeffers had picked up the telephone receiver with one hand and was trying to dry herself with a towel in the other.

"Hello," she said.

Her back was to him, but he noticed that she wasn't very efficient with the towel. Water dripped from her body and collected in a small pool around her feet.

He grinned and said, "Hello."

She whirled to face him and dropped the telephone receiver, her dark brown eyes widening.

"Harry Ogden," he said. "Remember?"

As soon as he asked the question, he knew it was a foolish one. The time trap was his trap alone and only he was conscious of all the repeated cycles. She was unaware of all their previous conversations and he was now a stranger to her.

She backed away and let out a scream.

It didn't bother him. It was music to his ears—a sound that broke the silence of his peculiar world—a weapon to combat boredom with, and he reflected that he would make many trips to apartment 1403. . . .

The ruby rolled across the table and fell to the floor.

He smiled as he picked the ruby up from the floor. He estimated that he'd lived more than twenty years in ten-minute intervals, and therefore the trap was not a death trap. He'd discovered countless ways of fighting boredom and knew he would never succumb to it and resultant insanity. He had entered the other apartments by using the stone ledge and breaking through the windows. In them he had found a total of hundreds of books . . . a pair of binoculars that he used to study a multitude of new things from his window . . . a typewriter that he used to write books although there was never

a completed manuscript . . . a chess set . . . decks of cards . . . hobbies. . . .

There were many more possibilities that he hadn't explored yet and he realized that the Martian had given him a valuable gift: extra years of life.

It seemed incredible that a machine could operate continuously for twenty years, but the ancient Martians had been expert in constructing devices without moving parts. He knew little science, but he could vaguely imagine a sort of "gateway" to the space-time continuum that the removal of the ruby had opened. Perhaps during a ten-minute period a predetermined amount of energy passed through the "gateway" and flowed against a radioactive substance in a way and with a force that thrust a few atoms backward in time to the point when the energy didn't exist and that established the cycle.

With moving parts, the machine wouldn't have run continuously for twenty years. *Something* would have broken down. Even without moving parts, the machine wouldn't run forever; the materials themselves would deteriorate sooner or later, or the energy passing through them from the space-time continuum would gradually disintegrate them no matter how strong they were. But for as long as the device operated, he would live

without growing old. If it ran a hundred years, he would live a hundred years. . . .

The ruby rolled across the table and fell to the floor.

He rubbed his aching head. He had lived approximately thirty years at ten-minute intervals, but the headache had started and grown in intensity during the last year and it was difficult to recall and appreciate all the things he had done.

The ruby rolled . . .

How many years had he lived? Fifty? A hundred? He was unable to calculate it any more, and it was even difficult to think about much simpler things. His mind was filled with memories . . . millions . . . billions . . . trillions of endless, countless

memories without any sleep to relax his mind . . . with no rest at all . . .

The ruby . . .

He no longer moved about the apartment, but sat in the chair during every cycle and watched the ruby as it rolled endlessly. Memories were like a crushing, paralyzing weight in his mind . . . a weight that grew and grew and . . .

The old Martian he had killed would have his revenge. He realized the ingenious machine was much more than a gift or a death trap. It was a torture machine. A torture machine that would operate for centuries; a machine that would gradually crush his mind and kill him with the sheer weight of *memories*. . . .

He screamed.

oo oo oo

HARD TO GET?

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Being last man on Earth fit in perfectly with the dreams of C. Herbert Markel III. But Rocky didn't!

WINGS of the PHOENIX

By JOHN BERNARD DALEY

Illustrated by ED EMSH

CHAPTER I

HE HAD A DREAM of Phoenix rising glorious from the bleak ashes of the world and a conviction that only he could make the dream real. To do this he needed two items: a woman, to produce the children of Phoenix, and books, to educate them. And so he searched the ruined land and the broken cities.

He had certain qualities that favored the success of his dreams: intelligence (BA, MA in English Literature), marksmanship (sharpshooter's medal, ROTC), and cunning (inherent). But he had one other quality that was most important to his survival and to the realization of his dream. That quality showed itself the day he found the girl in the broken city.



Silence lay over this city like a thick sea; it flowed like rivers in summer down long streets; it pooled stagnant in the backwash of alleys and dead-ends. Past skyscrapers it drifted, like eddies drift past towers in Atlantis. Overhead, pigeons dived like gulls beneath its surface, but their cries were not the cries of gulls.

A voice broke the silence that was drowning him. He spun crouching, the M-1 ready, and saw a girl running toward him. "Gad!" he said. (He had always felt that "Gad!" was a gentleman's expletive.) Seeing that she was not armed, he lowered the M-1. The girl, who was fat and dirty, crashed into him, flinging puffy arms around his neck. "Save me!" she yelled.

Her yellow hair, streaked with dirt and sunlight, was against his face; he breathed stale powder and sweat. For exactly this occasion he had a speech prepared. "Earth Mother! At last, the Earth Mother! Now will I lift Phoenix from the bleak ashes of the world!"

"Save me!" yelled the Earth Mother.

"Now will I rebuild civilization; now will a new race of man walk the earth!"

"Save me!" she yelled.

"From what?" he yelled.

"From everything! From the lonesomeness and the rats and

the no movies and the no fun anywhere and from Rocky!"

Abruptly she plopped to the street and started to cry. Her fat face quivered as she wheezed, and her nose ran. Impassively, he sat on the curb, handing her his handkerchief. From his jacket pocket he took a briar pipe, filled it with dried tobacco, and lit it. The Earth Mother cried. He smoked and waited.

September sun lay bright in the street, with shadows of elms on the lawn across from them. A porch swing creaked in the wind, and something too big to be a rat went past the porch and under the trees that everywhere were closing in on the cities. The Earth Mother's cries faded to sniffls. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes, and gave him his handkerchief. "Keep it," he said, coughing.

"Thanks. Oh, it's so good to see somebody else. You don't know how lonesome it's been here with nobody around but that goofy Rocky. I been praying somebody would come. Somebody real cool-looking, like you." She leaned toward him, blinking her eyes.

He leaned away from her. "And who, may I ask, is Rocky?"

"Joe Nowhere, that's who he is. Rides around on his goofy motorcycle all the time. He's mean, and real square. Like a cube, you know?"

He stared at her incredulously. Holding the pipe in his left hand, he put his right hand over his face. "I didn't really expect you to be pretty, but Gad, did you have to be a thoroughgoing idiot?" Eventually he lowered his hand. "If he's that bad, why didn't you run away?"

"Where to? Out there it's all empty and scary. Here it's something like it used to be."

He said, "Nothing is like it used to be."

"That lousy jerk," she said to herself. "The things he did to me! He pushed me around all the time, too."

For this situation too, he had a speech ready. Dramatically, he stood up. "Let me take you away from all this! Come, I offer you the chance to mother the new race!"

She said, "Okay, I'll go," and bounced to her feet, arms spread wide. He managed to catch her wrists, and said, "First, take me to the town library."

"Library? You out of your mind? What for?"

"What for? For books to feed the soul of Phoenix! I tell you, our civilization will not repeat the mistakes of this one!"

She shrugged. "So okay. It ain't far from where I live, anyway." All the way down the street she told him how glad she was to be going away with him, and all down another street

where no elms were, only sidewalks with broken glass on them. They walked past doorless apartments, gutted stores, and rusting, overturned cars. The scuffing of their shoes mingled with the stupid cooing of pigeons and the scuttling of rats.

They found no books in the library, only a skeleton with a high-heeled shoe on its left foot. As they walked down the steps the Earth Mother said, "I guess they burned them when it got cold."

"There were other things to burn," he said. In her apartment she packed two suitcases while he searched the other apartments for books. He found about a dozen paperbacks, Westerns and detectives, which he kicked into a corner. When he went back to her apartment she was pounding on the lid of a suitcase. He said, "Well, don't stand there smirking. Pick them up and we'll be off."

Hesitating, she said, "But I don't even know your name. We ought to know each other's names. Mine's Darlene."

"Gad, yes, it would be."

"But what's yours?" she said, the suitcases banging against the steps.

"Odysseus. Odysseus, the wanderer."

"I get it. You're kidding."

They walked half a block down the middle of the street

that was shadowed now by big late-summer clouds. With pride in his voice he said, "My name is C. Herbert Markel, the third." She had no answer to that.

As THEY REACHED the intersection leading to the street where he had left his car, he stopped abruptly. From behind them came a metallic growling that grew to an outrageous sputtering and roaring. They turned and saw a man on a motorcycle weaving spectacularly down the street, in and out between the debris. He cornered past a rusting old Chevrolet, circled, and curved to a stop a few yards away. The man leaned the motorcycle on its kick-stand, pushed back his black cap and said, "Hey, doll, where you going with this square?"

The Earth Mother said, "Look, it's Rocky!"

Rocky had a sheathed hunting knife in his black, rivet-studded belt, but no other weapons. His jacket, shirt, pants, and boots were black, as was the motorcycle. He glared at Markel. "What's your move, square man? Where in hell you going with my broad?"

"Don't try to stop us," said Markel, pointing the M-1 at Rocky's chest.

"Don't call me your broad," said the Earth Mother.

"Dad, nobody steals Rocky's

broad. I'm gonna chop you up."

Patting the stock of the M-1, Markel said, "I think you fail to realize the situation. You're in no position to chop up anybody."

Rocky laughed, then jerked his head at the Earth Mother. "Get with it, doll. Come here to Rocky. Get away from that square."

"No. I'm going with him, Rocky. I don't want to see you never again."

Squinting his already narrowed eyes, Rocky said, "You do and I'll get you, doll. I'll get you both."

Again Markel patted the stock of the M-1. "You haven't a chance. Now start that monstrosity and get out of here before I kill you."

"I'll hunt you down, square man, and when I find you, I'll chop you up good."

"Your threats leave me but one recourse," said Markel. He lifted the M-1.

Rocky laughed. "So go ahead, kill me. I'll hunt you down anyway. You dig me, man? I said, you kill me and I'll still get you. I'll hunt you down."

Markel's voice lifted. "Get out of here!"

Still laughing, Rocky leaned back and folded his arms. Markel shot him. Rocky, his mouth wide with laughter, fell backward from the motorcycle. Markel walked around the motorcycle

and shot him again, twice. Then he stood over him, until he was sure that Rocky was dead.

And that was the quality Markel had that was most important to his survival, and to the realization of his dream.

LEAVING ROCKY lying in the street, they walked to the car, a 1962 convertible. In the back seat Markel put the Earth Mother's suitcases, in with the spare wheels, ammunition boxes, sleeping bag, gasoline cans, cooking utensils, canned food, clothes, rope, car tools, and other necessities. Opening the trunk, he showed her the books he had collected so far, calling out some of the titles.

When he finished, she said, "You got any books on how to build houses, or fix toilets, or how to grow stuff? You know, like corn, or tomatoes?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Anybody can do that." He slammed the trunk shut, and they got into the convertible. He turned it around and drove to the highway. Where the highway turned west they had a last look at the city, bleak in the sun, with sunlight in the broken windows. Dust blew in the gutters, and pigeons drifted into the streets.

Then the outskirts of the city were behind them, and then the suburbs, and they went down the long, empty highway. Dusk came

soft on the fields and hills, and blue in the valleys. "The world is ours," said Markel.

"Man, this is a gone set of wheels," said the Earth Mother.

Before dark he stopped, driving several yards across a meadow to park near a small stream. Gathering deadwood and twigs, he made a fire while the Earth Mother, following his orders, fixed supper. After supper Markel said, "I think you've succeeded where the bombs and bugs failed. I do think you poisoned me." He drank two tin cups of bicarbonate (he was prepared for all emergencies) and felt somewhat better.

"This is kind of fun, I guess," she said. "Like a picnic I went on once. Everybody had a swell time and we all sang. I remember that real good." She sat staring at the fire. "We had lights hanging all around at night, though. It wasn't scary dark like this."

It was very dark, with a chill wind, when Markel got the sleeping bag and blankets from the convertible; these he spread on the grass several yards from the stream. After that he brushed his teeth at the stream, put out the fire, and rolled up in the blankets, the M-1 beside him. Just before he fell asleep he heard the Earth Mother squirming and shifting in the sleeping bag.

He awoke in blackness. The Earth Mother was snoring in

counterpoint to some crickets but neither of these sounds had awokened him. He took hold of the M-1, rolled over, and got to his knees. A few yards away the convertible was a solid black bulk in the lesser black of night, the highway a blacker strip beyond it. There was no moon. He heard the Earth Mother's snores, the crickets' sad chirping. The rain sound of leaves in wind. Then he heard the sound that had awokened him, a faint growling in the distance. Immobile, he listened. The sound stopped. Making no noise, he got to his feet and, crouching double, ran to the convertible. The growling came again. Far off between the black fields a silver needle stabbed briefly then curved away. The growling faded, and died in a series of sputters.

Markel eased across the wet grass to the highway's edge where he knelt with the M-1 ready across one knee. He stayed there a long time, but the sound did not come again, nor did the silver needle. Finally he went back to the blankets but he didn't sleep.

AT BREAKFAST the Earth Mother, her face bloated with sleep, said, "You ain't eating much and your eyes are all blood-shot like you didn't get no sleep."

"Any sleep," he said, pushing away the plate of greasy canned

meat. The coffee was hot, at least, and after he lit his pipe he felt better. He sat beside the girl while she scrubbed the tins in the stream. "Are you sure there was nobody in the city but you and Rocky?"

She wiped a greasy fork in the grass. "Yeah, I'm sure. I oughta know. There was only the two of us for a long time, till you came. Before, there was a whole lot of people, but everybody got sick and swelled up. They all died except me and Rocky. He didn't even get sick, like I did."

He was silent as they put the blankets and utensils in the convertible and stayed silent all morning as he drove between fields heavy with late-summer haze. The Earth Mother yawned. "How come you ain't said nothing all morning?"

"I've been thinking," he said.

"Yeah?" She switched on the radio, dialed it, listened, then switched it off. "I forget. I used to keep doing that all the time back in the apartment. But nothing ever happened, just like now."

"Nothing is likely to, either."

"Rocky always said that everybody else was dead. That ain't true, is it?"

"Not quite, but it's almost true. It's hard for someone like you to believe, I suppose."

"I can't believe it. Not everybody."

Abruptly he jammed on the brakes. "Listen!"

"What for? What's the matter?"

"Shut up! Listen!" Markel turned, staring back down the highway. In the distance he heard a faint growling. The Earth Mother opened her mouth; Markel shoved her back against the seat. "Listen! Did you hear that?"

They listened in the empty highway. Wind blew across the fields and high over them a hawk hung motionless. Again came the growling, louder, like a swarm of angry bees. It stopped. "You heard that, didn't you?" said Markel.

"I didn't hear nothing."

"You're deaf! Stupid deaf and dumb and blind! Damn it, didn't you hear anything?"

"I said I didn't, so I didn't."

Markel started the convertible. "Idiot. Low grade idiot."

"What're you so hacked about? What'd you hear, anyhow?"

For four or five minutes he drove without speaking. Then he said, "A motorcycle."

HE HAD IT reasoned out by supper time. There were lots of vehicles still around in good working order. And, although people were scarce, it was logical enough to assume that some scarce traveler was taking the same route they were. It was logical to assume that, because Mar-

kel had put three bullets into Rocky. He explained his logical theory to the Earth Mother. Concluding, he said, "And perhaps I really heard a car, not a motorcycle. Distance can be deceiving."

"Rocky was flipped on motorcycles. He had five or six around, always working on them. He used to ride all around just to pass the time."

"It wasn't Rocky I heard."

"He said he'd hunt us down." Markel laughed.

She said, "It's Rocky, you know it is! It's him, there's no other motorcycle riders around here!"

"Calm yourself. You're getting excited."

"It's Rocky's ghost! A horrible ghost!"

"He's dead, I tell you! Now, be quiet!"

She screamed, a falsetto blast that knifed the dark night. "A ghost! A horrible ghost!" Scrabbling to her feet, she ran screaming around the grove. She tripped over the blankets, but didn't fall; she caromed from the hood of the convertible, but kept going; she waved her arms and, screaming louder, headed toward Markel. When she came close he slapped her, hard. She stopped, then fell backward. After that she didn't scream any more.

Markel decided later, lying on his back looking at the stars, that she was much too emotional to

be the mother of the children of Phoenix. She was also stupid, illiterate, and boring. A strong, peasant body was her only asset. He would have preferred a woman closer to his own intelligence, but that, of course, was impossible. Remembering some of the women he had seen in other cities, he shuddered, and decided to make the best of the Earth Mother.

Later that night he dreamed. In this dream a golden bird floundered through fire that flamed blue and silver. The bird tried to fly away but the flames forced it down, and the golden bird sobbed. Markel awoke but heard only the Earth Mother crying in the dark. "Oh," he said drowsily and went back to sleep.

WHEN HE HEARD the motorcycle again, just before noon the next day, he decided to find out precisely who was driving it. It was very simple: all he had to do was let the driver catch up to them. So he stopped the convertible halfway up a long hill road that edged a cliff. He got out his binoculars and studied the road, which looped down the hill, straightened, and curled to the horizon. After a long wait in the hot sun he saw a black dot on the horizon. The dot moved, grew larger. Markel silently handed the binoculars to the Earth Mother.

She surprised him; she didn't scream. She calmly gave back the binoculars and said, "It's Rocky. He don't look like a ghost."

Markel ran, dragging her to the convertible. "You drive, and do exactly as I tell you." He got beside her, the M-1 ready, while she started the car. "Wait," he said. They waited until the noise of the motorcycle roared around the curve just below them. "Now! Pull out!" said Markel. She swung the convertible onto the road and a few minutes later the motorcycle curved up around the bend.

"Faster," Markel said. The convertible shot up and around the next bend, swerved close to the guard-rail, angled across the road, then straightened out. A moment later Rocky came leaning around the curve at a 30° angle; he swerved, leveled out, and came after them like a bullet. "Now! Slow down!" Markel shouted into the wind. He braced his left arm across the back of the seat and aimed the M-1.

Like a runaway jet Rocky came, a poor target crouched behind the plexiglas windshield. Markel fired and missed. For a split second the convertible swerved again and Markel held his breath. Rocky slowed, but he didn't slow enough. Markel's next shot hit the motorcycle's front tire. It blew like a popped balloon. The motorcycle wobbled,

spun, tilted on its front wheel, and smashed into the guard-rail. Like a diver, Rocky jackknifed out of the seat, the motorcycle somersaulting beneath him. Then both of them fell slowly down the cliff side.

The Earth Mother stopped the convertible without being told. "Back it up," Markel said. At the place where Rocky went over the cliff she braked it; they got out and went to the edge of the cliff.

The cliff dropped past sumac trees to a boulder-filled creek about a hundred feet below. Partly in the creek lay the smashed motorcycle and several feet away was Rocky, against a boulder. He was oddly twisted and very still.

"He looks dead," said Markel, "but this time I'm going to make sure."

He drove back down the hill to a point where the cliff met the road. Leaving the Earth Mother in the convertible he walked along the creek and found Rocky had broken both legs, his left arm, and his clavicle. Also, Rocky was not breathing and had no pulse. Satisfied, Markel went back to the convertible and the Earth Mother.

CHAPTER II

THAT, THEN, ended the episode, in Markel's mind. And now that Rocky was really dead

they could drive south leisurely. Markel planned to winter on the Gulf Coast, perhaps to build the new home of Phoenix there. So they went south through days yellow and warm in the September sun. Except for the emptiness, it was like being on a vacation tour.

There had not been emptiness like this in the land for three centuries. Nobody walked the farmlands where tractors rusted in the fields, no planes split the sky where birds soared, no car but theirs moved on the highway. They drove through towns that were like bleached bones in the sun. They passed peeling billboards, fading motels, battered, rusting cars, long, immobile freight trains—the scrap from a million dreams. Once they saw a big yellow tomcat prowling the edge of the highway like a lion; he snarled at them as they passed.

"It's awful," said the Earth Mother. "Nothing but birds and cats and trees."

"On the contrary, I think it fitting and just. Give the animals a chance, I say. Man had his chance and he botched it. In ten years the trees will obliterate this man-made ugliness and the land will be clean again."

"So who cares, if there's nobody to see it?"

"Somebody will see it. We and our children. The new race of man, guardians of Phoenix."

"Ain't this new race going to have lights, and towns, and movies, and dancing?"

"Not the kind of music and movies you keep talking about. We'll have no clods sponging up drivel from television sets."

"Yeah? Well, it sounds pretty square to me. I don't know if I want to be the mother of a bunch of squares like that."

Markel groaned, slapping his forehead with his left hand. "Gad! Why do I endure your stupidity day after day? Listen, the world you knew is dead, irrevocably dead. The new world is going to be completely, utterly different from it. Can't you grasp that?"

"You think that's going to be great, don't you? So what'll be so great and different about this new race you keep yakking about?"

"For one thing, they will not drop bombs on each other."

"Anybody that square won't know how to make bombs, or nothing else," she answered, turning on the radio.

That, Markel decided, was the most annoying of her habits, even more so than her constant preening in her hand mirror or her nasal, off-key singing of popular songs, or her ungrammatical speech. He spent a lot of time trying to correct her grammar but it was a frustrating job. He was able to resign himself to her only

by concentrating on his dream. In that he was constant.

They were in the foothills of mountains when the first autumn rain fell. Parking at the side of the road, Markel put up the convertible's top and they sat watching the rain. "It's kind of romantic, ain't it?" the Earth Mother said. "I always liked the rain." The thin rain drifted across the road, past a big barn and a farmhouse, past cornfields and yellow wheat and into wet woods. The Earth Mother leaned closer to him. "Just think, there's nobody here but us."

Autumn chill seeped into the car, but the girl was warm. Markel said, "Yes, only us alive in the vast desolation of the Earth." He looked across her shoulder at the gray, slanting sky and the low black clouds like blurred inkblots. "But there will be more of us, strong intelligent children, inheritors of the earth, guardians of Phoenix."

"You keep saying that but you never do anything about it."

"The children of Phoenix," said Markel dreamily.

Moving closer, the Earth Mother put fat arms around his neck and breathed like a bellows in his ear. Beyond the wet woods lightning spider-webbed the blotched sky. She kissed him, a fat-lipped kiss, and the rain drummed small on the roof. Markel felt strong and all-powerful. The

rain fell harder and the wind blew the sad, wet smell of autumn into the car. She kissed him again, and Markel forgot the ruined world and Phoenix, everything but the drowsy warmth of the car and the fat softness of the Earth Mother. There was no sound but the rain.

The rain fell harder, clanging on the hood, splatting on the windows. It pounded like forgotten battle-drums on the roof, growing louder, blurring into staccato. The staccato slurred into a steady hum. The hum lifted like the far-off buzzing of bees. Or like the growling of a motorcycle.

"MOTORCYCLE!" yelled Markel. The Earth Mother screamed and fell back on the seat, dragging him with her. He pulled loose, sat up, and rolled down the window. Rain needled his face. Under the rain sounds he heard it, distant but unmistakable, the growling of a motorcycle.

He twisted the ignition key. "Motorcycle," he said. He kicked the gas pedal. The convertible jerked forward, sending the Earth Mother rolling to the floor. "Motorcycle." He kicked the car forward again and onto the road where it ground into second gear. "Get up! Don't just lie there, you fat pig! It's a motorcycle!" Another lurch banged the girl's head on the dashboard. She got one

arm on the seat, screaming, "I can't hear nothing! You deafed me! I'm deaf."

"Shut up! It's a motorcycle!"

"You busted my eardrums! I'm deaf!"

The car lurched spasmodically, then stalled. He punched the starter and booted the gas pedal; this time the car bucked so violently that he was thrown backwards. "Motorcycle!" he yelled, feet in the air.

The Earth Mother was rolling on the floor again. "You're trying to kill me! First you deaf me then you try to kill me!"

He managed to get his foot back on the accelerator and the car spurted down the road. Markel fought the car grimly and got it under control, making it lurch in smoother leaps. When they finally rolled with reasonable normalcy down the road he looked into the rear-view mirror, but the road was empty. He drove furiously until he heard no sound but the rain. Banging his fist on the steering wheel, he said, "Gad! Am I to be pursued forever across a dead world by a deathless demon on a motorcycle?"

"I'm deaf, I'm deaf," said the Earth Mother.

WHEN THE RAIN stopped they took to the woods on foot. This time Markel did not try to rationalize the situation; he knew

it was Rocky on the motorcycle. Markel's usual self-control was shaken and he needed time to think. He drove the convertible as far into the woods as he could and began throwing things from the back seat.

"Let him follow us in here on that damn motorcycle," he said. He made two packs; in one he put canned food, cooking utensils and some tools; in the other he put extra ammunition, extra shoes, a medicine kit, rope, and several boxes of matches. This latter pack he tied to the Earth Mother's shoulders, fastening it with makeshift straps. Before they left he locked the convertible and covered it with branches and brush. He intended eventually to come back for the books.

That first day in the forest they made very little progress. He got tired of picking the Earth Mother up when she fell, and she complained loudly about their pace. It was different in the woods: there were no ruins to anchor them to the past; the forest was aloof from even the ruined world. "I don't like it here. It's worse than the towns," the Earth Mother said, sprawling against a tree.

"You'll get used to it." Markel yanked a twig from a fallen branch and chewed it. He said softly, "But why doesn't he die? It doesn't make sense. If I were not a rational, intelligent, think-

ing being, I'd be frightened right now."

"Well, I'm frightened, all right."

Rolling over to face her, he propped himself on his elbow. "You associated with Rocky for a long time. What was he like?"

"He was a slob, like I already told you. A real nowhere slob." She stared up at the leaves. "Sometimes he was okay, but what I couldn't stand was he was so stupid."

"No, no, that's not what I mean. Did he seem different in any way? Physically, for example?"

She sat up angrily. "I don't have to take no insults from you!"

"No, I mean did he seem different in the way he reacted to pain, or injury? You told me he didn't get sick when the plague hit the city."

She didn't answer for a while. "Yeah," she said thoughtfully. "I forgot. Yeah, he did. Once he fell off his motorcycle and gave his head a hit on a brick wall. I thought he was dead; he didn't breathe or nothing. And then just when I was getting real scared, in he walks, looking like nothing happened."

Markel rubbed his chin. "How long was it between the time he fell and the time he returned?"

"About a day, I guess. He just lay there all that time like dead."

Markel's thoughts went tangentially down a dark, twisted path. "Where was Rocky born? What did he do before the bombings? Did he ever say anything about the fall, how he felt, or anything—"

"Take it easy, will you? Like I said, I never seen him before the bombings. He was just there in the town, I guess."

Spitting out the twig, Markel filled his pipe and lapsed into isolated thought.

What it narrowed down to, he decided, was this: when ordinary men died they stayed dead. But Rocky died and recovered from death; therefore Rocky was not an ordinary man. The question, then: what, precisely, was Rocky? Logically, he could be only one of two things: a supernormal man or a supernatural one. Supernormal in that he was revived from death by bodily processes superior to those of normal men; or supernatural like a zombie or a vampire, both of which reputedly defied death. Markel preferred the supernormal theory; he didn't think highly of folk legends. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense.

And the "why" of it? Mutation, of course. Furthermore, where else would you find a mutant with superior survival qualities but among the survivors?

Markel tapped out his pipe and told the Earth Mother his theory.

She listened, eyes widening. Suddenly she grabbed her hair in both hands. "Ohmygod! A vampire! All that time I stayed with a vampire!"

"Now don't get excited. I did not say he was a vampire."

"A vampire! I lived with a vampire!"

"Gad!" said Markel disgustedly.

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS he was preoccupied, hardly speaking to her as they walked slowly through the forest that lifted into the mountains. The Earth Mother's feet blistered and swelled, her shoulders were rubbed raw by the pack straps, but Markel drove her steadily forward. On the fourth day he shot a pheasant, roasting it that evening while the Earth Mother sat with her feet in a pool. They had camped on a wide ledge backed by a cliff; a thin waterfall splashed down this cliff and pooled on the ledge before sloping down the mountain.

"Look at my feet! I can't walk another step, not one more step!"

Markel poked coals around the mud-covered pheasant. "Put them back in the water. I'm not interested in your fat feet."

"Yeah, you ain't interested in nothing but your lousy Phoenix. I say to hell with your lousy Phoenix, that's what I say! Besides, my feet ain't fat. I been

losing weight every day with all this walking."

Markel laughed. "Your feet will be all right in a few days. Come here and eat."

Sullenly, she came to the fire and they ate in silence. Eventually, Markel said, "I suppose it is rather rough on you, at that."

"Rough? I could take that, if you'd only treat me like a human being." She leaned forward eagerly. "Am I so awful you can't even touch me? Am I so fat and stupid?"

He peeled a piece of meat from a drumstick with his fingers.

"Am I? Tell me!"

"Calm down. You'll get hysterical again. Eat your pheasant."

She sat listlessly, her hands in her lap. "All right. But I'm so scared here, it's so lonesome. Nothing but trees, trees."

"You're actually safer here than in the cities. The trees and animals won't hurt you. It's only people you have to be afraid of."

"You think maybe there's some people in a city somewhere, with bright lights and drug stores, lots of people?"

"And movies and television and stupid music, that's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, there's a city like that somewhere, ain't there?"

"Isn't there, not ain't there?" He stared at her appraisingly. She was a clod, but even a clod,

he supposed, could feel sadness and regret for all the lost, familiar things. On a low level, of course. Tossing the drumstick bone into the fire he said, "Why not face facts? There's no city like that."

FOR DAYS they climbed further into the mountains. On the eighth day they followed a narrow path between pines along a ridge and into a group of weathered houses little more than shacks. A store and a gas station dominated the single street. In the store they found some cans of vegetables and dried packs of cigarettes. A small radio sat on a shelf behind a counter; the Earth Mother switched it on, listened, then turned it off. Smoking a very dry cigarette, Markel stood on the porch, looking down the street.

Suddenly he unslung the M-1, dropped to one knee, and fired. A man in black lurched from the doorway of a shack, took two steps forward, then sagged to his knees. Markel fired again and the man fell face forward in the dust.

Markel walked to the man. It was not Rocky. This was an old man with white hair and whiskers. He wore a black shirt and ragged overalls and he was gaunt. He looked at Markel with surprise and reproach in his eyes; then he died.

"I thought it was Rocky," said the Earth Mother.

"No," said Markel, covering the man's face.

In a shed behind one of the shacks he found a pick and shovel, with which he dug a grave. It took him most of the afternoon in the hot sun. Then he buried the old man, rolling him into the grave with the pick handle.

"We're going back," he said, walking to where the Earth Mother sat on the steps of the store.

"Where? What for?"

"Back to the ledge, to wait for Rocky. We can't spend the rest of our lives running from him, and wasting ammunition on every man wearing black."

They went back then to the waterfall, where Markel could command a slope on three sides and where the cliff protected his back. They settled down to wait for Rocky and they both knew Rocky would find them. Markel waited grimly, because if his theory were correct Rocky was a threat to his dream.

Against the cliff Markel built a crude lean-to and the Earth Mother picked flowers, hanging them around the walls. Markel, working constantly, made several traps for Rocky in the area around the ledge. When he finished these there was nothing to do but wait.

Markel liked it there. Big autumn clouds shadowed the ledge; mist drifted in the green valleys in the mornings and at night the loons called through the wind in the woods. The Earth Mother grew tan in the sun and she sang to herself. Markel sat by the waterfall, cleaning and polishing the M-1. And, inevitably, one morning Rocky came.

CHAPTER III

HE CAME walking across a hogback and Markel, watching through his binoculars, grinned and inspected the M-1 again. For an hour he watched Rocky, until he was hidden by the slope. Time passed: silver, morning time. Then a yell shattered the stillness and Markel was up and running down the path.

Where the ledge began to dip onto the slope he found Rocky. He almost bumped into him. Rocky hung upside down over the path, his right ankle noosed in a rope that was tied to a bowed sapling, his head about on a level with Markel's. "Crisake! Get me down outta here!" Rocky said.

Markel stood silent. Coming up behind Markel, the Earth Mother stopped, saw Rocky, and screamed half-heartedly.

"Hey, doll! Get me down outta here, will you?" Rocky said.

"I don't want nothing to do with vampires," she said.

"You outta your mind? Come on, get me down!"

Markel said, "I told you he wasn't a vampire."

"Yeah? Then why ain't he dead?"

Markel jabbed Rocky's chest with the muzzle of the M-1. "Precisely what I want to know, Rocky. As our girl friend puts it, why ain't you dead?"

"Look, man, I'm getting dizzy. Cut me down, then we'll talk."

"I'll give the orders, Rocky. What are you, Rocky?"

"That's a nowhere question. What am I—I'm dizzy, man, dizzy! You gonna talk all day?"

The Earth Mother said, "You look kind of funny upside-down like that."

Markel said, "Why do you keep coming back to life, Rocky?"

"Who, me? I ain't never been dead, man."

"The truth, Rocky, or I'll leave you hanging here. How did you survive the fall over the cliff and the bullets in the city?"

"Man, you wouldn't believe me if I did tell you."

She said, "Better tell him, Rocky. You're getting red in the face."

"Will you cut me down, Dad? If I tell you?"

Markel jabbed him again with the M-1. Rocky said, "Okay,

okay. When I fell over the cliff I landed in a bunch of trees and they broke my fall. Back in the city you put a bullet in a pitcher of my mother what I always carry in my chest pocket. Didn't kill me at all."

"Oh, Gad!" said Markel. Like a plumb-bob Rocky had turned slowly on the rope until his back was to them. Placing the M-1 on the ground, Markel reached up and, with some difficulty, pulled Rocky's leather jacket down so that it bunched around his shoulders. Ignoring Rocky's complaints, he ripped Rocky's shirt open. Rocky's skin was unmarked by bullet scars or broken bones. Markel squeezed Rocky's left arm that had been broken, and stepped back, his face pale. Theory was one thing, confirmation of it something different. Markel said, "He's as whole as you or I. Rocky, how long have you known you're superhuman?"

Coughing, Rocky said, "You're talking like a bughead, man."

"He looks horrible. Why don't you cut him down?" said the Earth Mother.

Again Rocky coughed. "Square man, cut me down, will you? Look, all I wanted from you was somebody to talk to. I was only bluffing about chopping you up. I can't take having nobody to talk to, you dig that, can't you? Let me go with you; let's make a deal."

The Earth Mother said, "Yeah, why don't you let him come along?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Besides, I can't stand vampires," Markel said, picking up the M-1. "Your last chance, Rocky."

Flailing the air, Rocky said, "You're bugging me, man. To hell with you." Then his arms hung limp and his eyes closed.

Cutting Rocky down from the rope, Markel carried him to the camp, where he sat him against a tree, tying his hands behind it. "Go make some coffee. This may take a long time," Markel said.

"What are you going to do?" said the Earth Mother.

"Find a way to kill him, of course."

ROCKY CAME TO shortly afterward, glaring angrily at Markel. Markel stood over him. "Rocky, you can save yourself a lot of trouble by just telling me about it, and how you do it."

Rocky spat on the ground. "And after, you'll knock me off again, huh? Listen, I wouldn't tell you the right time, square man."

Markel sighed. "Typical peasant arrogance," he said, shooting Rocky squarely in the forehead.

According to Markel's wrist watch Rocky stayed dead—that is, without pulse or respiration—for seven hours and forty-six minutes. During the first three

hours Markel sat incredulously, not believing his eyes, watching the bullet hole in Rocky's head stop bleeding and slowly close, until there was no evidence of a wound. Rocky woke up cursing him.

The next morning, immediately after breakfast, Markel stabbed Rocky through the heart with Rocky's knife. The wound closed in slightly under four hours, after which respiration began again. Rocky remained unconscious for six more hours; he was dead, in all, for nine hours and twelve minutes.

Markel bashed Rocky's head in with a dead branch. In twelve hours and thirty-one minutes Rocky was awake and cursing, his skull completely healed.

Making a noose in the rope, Markel hanged Rocky from a pine tree near the cliff, shoving him from an outcrop to break his neck. His neck broke. Time for recovery: fourteen hours eight minutes. Rocky's neck: completely healed.

"It takes an average of three hours longer for his bones to heal than for his tissues," said Markel as he and the Earth Mother ate breakfast. Rocky had not been fed since the trials had started; Markel was also trying to starve him.

"You talk about him like he was a bug, or something," said the Earth Mother. Her eyes were

red and she ate very little. After the first day she had spent most of her time in the lean-to, not watching what Markel did to Rocky.

Markel speared a canned apricot with his fork. "I'll get him. He's vulnerable somewhere." But the Earth Mother, staring into the woods, didn't answer him.

Markel tied Rocky's hands and feet, weighted him with stones, rolled him into the cold pool, and kept him there six hours. When he dragged him out, Rocky was blue, his flesh icy. He looked deader than he ever had. Respiration began nine hours and eight minutes later.

For hours afterward Markel sat staring at Rocky. Dusk came and the ledge was blue with shadows when Markel got up and be-

gan to pile twigs and branches around Rocky. From the campfire he took a burning branch and walked to where Rocky lay, conscious but silent. "Rocky," he said. "I think this is it. I'll put you out first; it will be less painful that way."

"Don't do me no favors," said Rocky.

Tilting the burning branch to keep it flaming, Markel said, "Rocky, I want you to know I'm not doing this just to torment you. You're in my way, that's all."

Rocky laughed and looked at the sky.

Markel lowered the flaming branch; it quivered violently. "Damn it!" said Markel. Like many people, he had a horror of fire, of burning alive. And even if Rocky were unconscious, he



would still be alive in the flames. Turning, Markel threw the burning branch at the campfire and walked away angrily. Behind him Rocky said, "You losing your guts, square man?"

ALL THAT NIGHT Markel sat thinking by the campfire. Slightly before dawn he had the answer; it was so simple that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. The point was, if you can't kill an indestructible man you can still stop him.

When the Earth Mother came out of the lean-to she found Markel standing by both rolled packs. Answering her questioning glance he said, "We're leaving right now, for the convertible."

"You really mean it? Oh, that's swell. What about Rocky?"

You're going to let him go, aren't you?"

Markel fastened the pack to her shoulders and told her to go on ahead, that he would catch up to her in a few minutes. He waited impatiently until she was out of sight down the path.

Then he knocked Rocky unconscious and cut off his head.

At the pool he washed his hands, and, adjusting his pack, walked down the path. There, not far from the camp, stood the Earth Mother, her face pale. "Don't come near me!" she yelled. "I saw you! I saw what you did!"

"I told you to go on ahead," said Markel quietly.

She pushed at the air. "Get away! Bloody hands! Bloody!"

When he came near her she slapped at him wildly, but he



caught her wrists. "Don't get excited. I had to do it; you know that." Sobbing hoarsely, she went limp against him and he led her unresisting down the path.

Down the slope they went and through the clean, morning frost. They walked back toward the convertible, over hogbacks and through valleys. The wind was cold and dead leaves blew around them. When night came the Earth Mother spoke for the first time since morning. "It was such a terrible thing to do," she said, looking into the shadows. "Cutting off his head. Did you have to do that? Couldn't you of let him go, or come with us? He said he was only lonesome, like us."

"Of course I had to do it. It was the only way to stop him. If I had let him go he'd have followed us forever, you know that. He wanted you and he wanted revenge." Markel lit his pipe with a burning twig from the fire. "He stood in the way of Phoenix, and our new world."

The Earth Mother said, "Horrible, so horrible."

Markel blew smoke. "As for letting him come along, well, he'd have knifed me the first time I turned my back. He was nothing but a gutter rat, a hood. There's no room in our new world for clods like that."

THE CONVERTIBLE, still cov-

ered with branches, stood where they had left it, and in a while they drove south again toward the place of Phoenix. Now the wind blew steadily, full of dry autumn. Ahead of them like an arrow the highway went, empty of overturned cars or abandoned junk, empty except for grass in its cracks and for blowing dust. They saw birds and quick small animals, but nothing else.

So they went on and some nights the Earth Mother cried in her sleep. And one night Markel dreamed again of the golden bird trapped in the flame. Reaching out, Markel tried to help the golden bird but the flames were too strong, and he awoke. Sleepily, he looked around. The Earth Mother was gone.

They had camped on a low hill above a farm. Markel lit his pipe, pulled on his shoes, and searched near the camp. Not finding her, he walked down through the fields to the farmhouse. She was in the kitchen of the dusty, dried house, sitting at the table. Markel leaned against the door-jamb, aware that he was very much relieved. After all, she was essential to his dream, and although he didn't like to admit it to himself, he had become rather used to her.

He said, "Well, what's all this about?"

She got up and walked to the window. "There used to be cows

in fields like that, cows with bells around their necks, and people walking there. Now there's no cows, and no people. Now there's nothing." Her silhouette against the window, he saw, was less thick than it had been; she actually had lost weight. She said, "Will we ever find a place where there's people? Are there really any people anywhere on Earth except us?"

"Certainly," he said lightly. "Lots of people, all watching television."

"Where?"

"Oh, Patagonia, Central Africa, the South Seas."

She said, "No. Nobody anywhere. No cows and no people."

After searching the farmhouse for books, and finding none, Markel took her back through the blowing fields to the convertible.

THE SUN WAS HOT and the trees were soft-looking and blurred; moss drooped from some of them. But the autumn wind still blew and big clouds leaned across the sky. Accustomed to the Earth Mother's constant jabbering, Markel was perturbed because she had said very little since they had left the woods. She stared out at the road for hours or listened to the silent radio, and Markel did not like it.

The highway speared through faded wild-grain fields, through rusty meadows. The autumn

death came soft to the land, not like the death that had come to the cities.

"Listen!" exclaimed the Earth Mother.

Startled, Markel turned. She was twisting the volume-knob on the radio. "Listen to that!" she said.

Markel heard only the burr of their tires on macadam and the wind against the windshield. "Listen to what?"

"This crazy music! Listen, doesn't it flip you?" Smiling, she stared dreamily at the radio. "Those saxes, ain't they the most?" She moved her head rhythmically.

Stopping the convertible, Markel grabbed the Earth Mother's arms. He said, "Stop it! There is no music! You're imagining things!"

"Those saxes, oh, are they swinging! Listen!" Her eyes were looking through Markel, looking into a world of music, and lights, and movies, and people.

"There's nothing, do you understand? You're hearing things! Stop it!" He shook her roughly. Her eyes clouded and she tried to push him away.

"Come out of it! There's no music. You don't hear music!"

"Let me go! Let me hear it! Oh, it's fading, fading!"

He kept shaking her, and slowly her eyes cleared. She stopped trying to push him away. She

said, "It's over, the pretty music is over."

"You're all right now," Markel said, letting go of her arms.

NOW THE HIGHWAY arrowed straight no longer, climbing again into low hills. Up they went past peeling billboards, motels, chinaware stands, gas stations, and roadside diners. "We're coming to a city," the Earth Mother said. "I'll bet there'll be people in it, lots and lots of people."

"It will be like all the other cities," Markel said.

She leaned close and patted his arm, as though he were a child. "I'll bet you even find some books there," she said.

An hour later they drove into the city. This was a city of winds. Harp-winds twanged through wires and steel braces; drum-winds banged torn awnings and loose windows; wind-trumpets shouted through broken walls and called muted past high steeples and chimneys. Sunlight lay thick in the streets and on the roofs, but the winds owned this city, like the blowing winds own Babylon, and Petra, and Chaldean Ur.

Down a street that opened on a wide square they went and Markel parked by a statue of a horseman in the middle of the square. Before he had shut off the motor the Earth Mother was

out of the convertible. Standing by the statue she called, "Hey! Is there anybody here?" Then she ran to the sidewalk.

Markel, reaching for the M-1, his eyes on the girl, suddenly stiffened. The wind blew a sound to him, a faint growling sound. He did not believe the sound, knew it to be a trick of his imagination, yet he sat stunned, unable to think. Then the Earth Mother screamed. Markel got out of the car and went after her.

She was on the sidewalk, calling into doorways. "Come out! I know you're here! Come out!"

Shouting, she walked past a drug store and a bakery. "You hiding in there? Come out!"

She started to run. "Please don't hide! I know you're in there! Come out!" Then she screamed again.

She ran down the street screaming, she pounded on doors and windows, she screamed until the echoes ran together and the square was filled with one incessant long scream.

She was still screaming when Markel caught up to her. He hit her on the jaw, once, and she sagged limp against him. With the echoes of her screams all around him he carried her to the statue and put her down on the base.

She lay quiet, the wind moving her hair that was yellow as the wheat fields. Looking down at

her, Markel remembered all the yellow-haired girls who had walked in the sun, all the proud girls in the proud cities. He put his hand on her hair, wondering why he had ever thought she was ugly. Now she was almost slim and almost beautiful. He remembered how she had felt, close against him in the car that day in the rain, and how she had cried in the nights. Suddenly he knelt and kissed her dry lips.

Dust blew past him and behind him glass fell in a trumpet blast of wind. It occurred to him then that perhaps no dream was better than the touch of yellow hair in the sun or the kiss of dry lips. And in that moment C. Herbert Markel the Third became a part of all humanity, because for the first time he knew pity, regret, and the beginnings of love.

"Hello, square man," said a voice behind him.

SLOWLY, like a drunken man, Markel got up and turned. Two yards away stood Rocky, his hunting knife held low in his right hand. Incredulously, Markel stared at Rocky's head. It was about half as large as it had been previously. Approximately the size of a canteloupe, it sat incongruously on Rocky's thick neck. "Good God," said Markel.

Rocky said, "Rocky never dies." He tossed the knife in the

air, caught it deftly by its point. "It grew back, square man."

Markel saw that this unquestionably was Rocky: the same black clothes, ragged now and dirty, the same narrowed eyes in the sullen but now doll-sized face. Casually, Rocky said, "I woke up feeling a little beat, and first thing I see is my old head, laying where you left it. Man, this bugs me till I reach up and feel around, and there I am, with a new head."

Markel let out his breath. Never before had there been a man like Rocky. And Markel saw the irony of it. He said, "Rocky, the unkillable clod, the idiot superman."

Grinning, Rocky said, "Yeah, call me names while you got the chance, because now you get yours, square man."

Staring at Rocky's knife, Markel was suddenly aware that he had left the M-1 in the convertible.

Gesturing toward the Earth Mother, Rocky said, "She flip her lid?"

Markel said mechanically, "She's all right. A touch of hysteria, that's all."

"Good. I want her to watch me work on you and see what I do to squares what steal my broad."

Gauging the distance between them, Markel figured his chances. He was bigger than Rocky; if he

could stay away from the knife he could handle him. It would depend on Rocky's speed with the knife. Markel knew, desperately, that he had to win. If Rocky won, the world would belong to the deathless clod.

"I owe you plenty, square man. For all them times dead I owe you. And now I'm going to cut you like nobody's ever been cut."

Behind Markel there was a rustle of clothes, a scraping on cement, then a loud gasp. Rocky looked past Markel to the base of the statue.

Markel said, "Darlene! Don't be frightened! Get the M-1 from the front seat of the car. When he moves, shoot him!"

Hesitant footsteps shuffled on cement, and the car door clicked. Rocky did not move. "She ain't got the guts," he said. Noiselessly, Markel moved toward Rocky, but quick as thought Rocky spun, the knife ready. Markel stopped, tense.

"I can't wait, square man. I just can't wait to start working on you."

"You haven't a chance, Rocky. After she shoots you I'll chop you into a hundred pieces and burn

every one. Even a freak like you won't recover from that." Rocky, his left arm out to balance himself, came at Markel, the knife low and steady in his right hand. Behind Markel the car door clanged shut. Rocky came on, the knife silver in the sun.

Without raising his voice Markel said, "Now!" and waited.

The M-1 cracked. All the sunlight in the square flamed at Markel as the bullet slammed into his back, and then he was falling into the flame and the flame engulfed him, but it was hard, like cement, and he dug his fingers into it to keep from falling into the blackness beyond it.

Beyond the flame someone was crying. A woman's voice said, "I couldn't let him hurt you again, Rocky, not again." Through the flame came a golden bird, hopping grotesquely because it had no wings. The bird was crying, and Markel reached out to it. But the flame flared silver between them and, still reaching for the golden bird, Markel slid from the hard flame into blackness. And that was the end of Markel and his dream.

That was the end of all dreams.

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• The next *Infinity* goes on sale MARCH 18! •

Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

CIТИZEN OF THE GALAXY, by Robert A. Heinlein. Scribner's, \$2.95.

This novel, recently serialized in *Astounding*, is longer and meatier than any of Heinlein's previous books in this series, and the way it is packaged suggests to me that Scribner's may be pushing it both as a juvenile and as an adult novel. If so, hurray; I don't see any reason why not.

The book is written in four almost equal sections. Part I takes place in a city called Jubbulpore, "capitol of Jubbul and of the Nine Worlds, residence in chief of the Great Sargon." The story begins:

"'Lot ninety-seven,' the auctioneer announced. 'A boy.'"

The boy is a half-starved, savage waif named Thorby, who bears on his back "white scar streaks, endorsements of former owners' opinions." He is no bargain at any price; through a combination of buyers' apathy and a blunder of the auctioneer, he is sold for two minims—less than the stamp tax on the transaction—to a one-eyed, one-legged

beggar named Baslim.

Baslim cleans him up, feeds him, houses him in a well-equipped hideaway under the ruins of the old amphitheater, and slowly makes a human being out of him. The quasi-Oriental background of this section is pushed back almost out of sight: Heinlein's chief concern is with the developing father-son relationship, and he makes it fascinating. The early stages, when Baslim has to gain Thorby's confidence by the methods one would use on a wild animal, are touching and absolutely real.

Later, in spite of digressions into the art of beggary and the art of learning itself, it becomes clear that what Baslim has to teach is not technique but character. Baslim is an old-fashioned, stiff-necked moral individualist, who keeps undeviating standards for himself while insisting on absolute freedom for other people. He rules by love, teaches by example. Only by inference, almost casually, does it appear that he is something more than an incongruously educated beggar:

he is a spy, smuggling out information about the space traffic of Jubbulpore.

When he dies, caught by the Sargon's police and "shortened"—beheaded—Thorby is adopted by one of Baslim's contacts, a Free Trader named Krausa. Part I ends. Part II takes place largely on the Free Traders ship *Sisu*.

The Traders are interstellar gypsies, speaking a "secret language"—in this case, Finnish—living only in their ships, and keeping their integrity by an elaborate formal culture. Heinlein's exposition of this is typically thorough and lucid; where almost anybody else would have gone into long, windy rhapsodies over the supposed wild freedom of the space gypsies, Heinlein tells you in detail about their phratry relationships and their fire-control systems.

Thorby's gradual evolution from a *fraki* (i.e., non-Trader scum) to an assimilated member of the crew is set forth plausibly; he nearly winds up in a political marriage contrived by the matriarch of *Sisu*; but Krausa, following Baslim's instructions to the letter even though it hurts, turns him over to the commander of the Terran Hegemony Guard Cruiser *Hydra*.

Part II ends. Part III takes place largely on *Hydra*.

Once more Thorby has to begin from scratch in a strange en-

vironment; and along about here, you begin to realize that in spite of his apparently successful adjustments, Thorby is someone to feel sorry for: he has a real, tough "Who am I?" problem.

The Guard commander, trying to identify him through the resources of the Hegemony, fails just long enough to make the result seem in doubt. Then he succeeds: Thorby turns out to be a long-lost heir, and the Guard delivers him to his home on Earth.

Part III ends. Part IV takes place on Earth.

Thorby now finds himself a multimillionaire, "Rudbeck of Rudbeck," whose position has been usurped by a wicked uncle. This plot is so familiar (though unusual in science fiction) that its puzzle value is nil. The basic pattern is one of the strongest in fiction, but its use here has an inherent contradiction which Heinlein is too honest to duck. For real suspense, you need a tough problem, to be solved by the hero's own courage and resourcefulness. But in a problem of this kind, courage and resourcefulness are not much to the point: what the hero ought to do is hire a good lawyer; and that's what Thorby (a little belatedly) does.

The ensuing legal contest is treated in careful detail, but Thorby is hardly more than an interested spectator; and I think

we have to call this section of the plot a failure in its own terms.

Technically speaking, *Citizen of the Galaxy* has two major flaws. The first and more serious is the story's division into four separate parts, each with its own distinct background and cast of characters. Only Thorby appears in all four sections; every other character stays strictly in his own compartment. This prevents the book from achieving any unity, or even continuity for more than half a dozen chapters at a time. Further, it disposes of the book's best character one-quarter of the way through. Baslim is by far the strongest, solidest, most plausible and interesting character; it seems to me a serious error to write him off so early. Still further, although the four-part division allows Heinlein to include more backgrounds, it does not give him space to develop any one of them fully. The *Kim*-like wicked Oriental splendor of Part I is shrugged aside; the backgrounds of Parts II and III are merely detailed vignettes—Thorby never becomes really a part of either the Traders' or the Guards' society, and his involvement in their doings is slight.

Second, nearly all the characters seem to be *in* but not *of* their environments. This is most striking in Thorby himself. Twice in Part II, and again in Part IV, beautiful young ladies throw

themselves at his head with about as much effect as if he were a mollusk. The plain inference is that Thorby has had so many cold showers and invigorating scrimmages that he has got through puberty without as much as noticing the difference between the sexes. This is a pious convention in the upper-class literature of the early 20th century, which dealt with young men who actually got the scrimmages and cold showers: in a story about a slave boy, who grew up in the gutters of an Oriental port, it is a stupefying incongruity. I take this to be a restriction imposed on Heinlein by librarians' censorship, and for all I know he may have emphasized it deliberately to show how foolish it is. All the same, it is there, and other characters (particularly the young Traders) show a similar fault: forgetting who and where they are, they sometimes think, act and talk too much like mid-20th-century middle-class Americans.

But: when you've totaled up everything that can be said against the novel, it remains an enormously entertaining, rich, satisfying story. Heinlein is a man who believes in good workmanship and honest measure: each of his plot-tight compartments is at least packed full.

The lucid discussion of the Traders' kinship system in Part II will undoubtedly lead some of

Heinlein's readers for the first time into the fascinating field of cultural anthropology. The knowledgeable (and comic) descriptions of life aboard a military vessel may someday tip the scales for a Navy-minded man, one way or the other. Thorby's difficulties with the disappearing furniture in his "bunkie" aboard *Sisu* are funny and illuminating at the same time. The book is full of gentle ironies, from the name of the place in Jubbulpore where the slave auctions are held (the Plaza of Liberty), to the name of the woman anthropologist who is traveling with the Traders (Margaret Mader). Everywhere the story alights, however briefly, you have the feeling that Heinlein has done more work than was required.

Compartmented as it is, the plot does draw some continuity from the gradually emerging thread of Baslim's fight against the slave trade. Thorby's final choice among his four possible identities is adroitly and suspensefully handled.

The story ends inconclusively, with nothing actually solved or settled; the scale is too big for that—the whole galaxy, and centuries of time.

This may not be in any sense a great book, but it is a big one: it has the bigness that distinguishes science fiction at its best from any other form.

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PILGRIMAGE TO EARTH, by Robert Sheckley. Bantam, 35¢.

If the fifteen stories in this book have a common point, it is that man is less clever than he thinks himself. In "All the Things You Are," for instance, a well-meaning contact man on a primitive world (a) stuns the natives with his halitosis, (b) disintegrates a bridge with his loud voice, (c) accidentally hypnotizes the natives with his soothing gestures, (d) burns them with his sweaty handshake. In "Early Model," and again in "Earth, Air, Fire and Water," a man is nearly killed by an over-elaborate mechanism designed to protect him.

Man, Sheckley seems to be saying, could use a little less cleverness and a little more humility.

The moral would have even more point, it seems to me, if Sheckley gave cleverness a fair shake.

"It suddenly struck him that in all the time of mankind, nothing had changed. Perhaps the cave was a little bigger, the flints a little better, but man himself was no bigger, no tougher, no better fit."

—And, unfortunately, in these stories, no brighter. Sheckley's heroes weigh in at an I.Q. of about ninety, just sufficient to get them aboard their shiny machines, but not enough to push all the right levers. In "Earth, Air, Fire

and Water," from which the quotation above is taken, a man is set down *alone* on *Venus* (my God) to field-test a *spacesuit* (Jehosaphat!). It is not cleverness which promptly gets him into trouble, it is this initial idiocy.

In "Milk Run," AAA Ace's Arnold and Gregor ship a load of extraterrestrial animals without bothering to find out anything about them; in "The Lifeboat Mutiny," they trustingly buy an alien-built lifeboat, again without asking questions, although this same gaffe has got Sheckley men into dire peril before. In "Bad Medicine," a man buys a floor-model therapy machine which turns out to be one designed for Martians. "I can explain that," says Sheckley through a character named Follansbee; but he can't, and doesn't.

These stories are deft and impudently funny, as when the man with the Martian therapy machine winds up saying, "'It's the damnedest thing . . . but do you know, I think I *do* remember my goricae!'" Sheckley's trademark is his ability to spin this kind of thing out of nothing.

Once in a great while, when Sheckley bothers to put something under his slick surfaces, his work comes brilliantly and even movingly to life. "Fear in the Night," is a beautifully expert and chilling exercise in pure horror, with the real shock coming when the fan-

tasy element is dispelled. "The Body," in spite of its slipshod technical background, is a curiously pathetic story of a scientist's mind (brain?) transplanted into a dog's body. "Pilgrimage From Earth" is a compelling romantic satire about a young man who comes to Earth looking for love, an antique emotion which Earth has turned into a paying proposition. The story is grotesque and tender, poetic and ugly by turns.

Sheckley, like Bradbury and Matheson, is a "science fiction" writer who does not write about science. His engine rooms have nothing in them but big rotating shafts; his "linguascene," which magically translates unknown languages, is an empty box. He identifies a planet as "near Arcturus," and even his references to existing devices are childishly askew ("degermifier," "ossilyscope"), as if to say, "See, I don't know anything about science, so don't ask me."

I think this is essentially laziness. The writer of burlesque is not immune from the demands of good workmanship. Guy Gilpatric took care to put a real merchant ship under his burlesque hero, Colin Glencannon, and the stories are a hundred times funnier than if he had botched it.

Like it or not, what Sheckley does is art. But he could use a little less art, and a little more craftsmanship. ∞





SLICE OF LIFE

By CALVIN M. KNOX

Danny's world was a private wonderland, a fabulous place which no one else could enter without destroying. And Onslow had to enter it somehow!



Illustrated by RICHARD KLUGA

DANNY'S WORLD was one of shapes and colors—of swirling red lights and glittering blue clouds, of misty hills and fog-bound seas. It was a warm and comforting place, quite unlike the less friendly world beyond his bedroom.

He was lying in bed with the counterpane tucked tightly around his scrawny eleven-year-old body, lying back with his head nestling pleasantly in the sweet-smelling foam of the pillow. Somewhere in the shadows at the far end of the room, a

radio was playing soft music. Danny's mother left the radio on almost constantly, thinking the music would soothe Danny, would calm him and keep his mind from dwelling on the accident that had crippled him and robbed him of his birthright.

Danny needed no soothing, though. He never heard the music—not *that* music, anyway.

There was another music, an unheard music that sang softly through the arching cliffs and cloud-washed valleys of Danny's *other* world. It was the song Hammel the Drinker sang, Hammel of the bright eyes and lusty arms.

Danny listened raptly to Hammel as he sang of the Mountains of Eyorn and the seven golden sisters who guarded the Lair of Many Lions far to the east. Some day, Hammel promised, Danny would see the Lair. Some day—

From outside the bedroom came the coarse sounds of voices. Danny wrinkled his nose in annoyance. Mother had said there would be a man to see him, just to talk to him and be nice to him.

Reluctantly, Danny drew his conscious mind away from Hammel, and waited for the horrid moment when the door would open and one of *them* would step in.

"WE'RE GLAD you're here," Selma Raab said. She was send-

ing warmth, friendship, hope. Especially hope, David Onslow noted.

He took her hand, pressed it tight. From the staircase behind him came a flow of new impressions: suspicion, doubt, succeeded by hope hope hope. Onslow glanced back and saw the blocky figure of Leonard Raab appear.

They were good people, Onslow thought immediately. They were sincerely unhappy about their son—as who wouldn't be? —and they would be as cooperative as they could be with Onslow. He radiated strength and kindness on the highest level, and knew from the expressions on the Raabs' faces that the deeper levels of his mind must be beaming the same hopeful message. He was certain he could cure Danny, and he wanted the Raabs to know that at once.

"Won't you sit down?" Mrs. Raab said graciously. She was about thirty-five, still pretty, though the tragedy that had struck her son had left its mark on her, in the crosshatched veining beneath her eyes and in the too-sharp curves of her cheekbones.

Onslow took a seat in one corner and made himself comfortable. "Your apartment is a very congenial one," he said, smiling. "I feel right at home already."

"We're glad to hear that," Selma Raab said graciously.

"We've tried to give Danny the finest home life—to make up for—to—to—"

Her voice trickled away into helpless wordlessness. She was radiating *despair, agony, sense of injustice.*

"I know what you mean," Onslow said gently. He looked around. The home was furnished in period style—Early Twentieth Century, apparently, with tradition non-functional fireplace, warm wall-colors, pleasantly undecorative furniture. Above the fireplace hung a large but blotchy reproduction of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, with an ornate and somewhat ridiculous frame. Onslow let his eyes rest on the painting for a moment, playing an old game: he was wishing that paintings could somehow telepath their emotions the way people did, so at last the ambiguities of the Gioconda's smile would be solved.

Then he leaned forward in the chair and surveyed the anxious faces of the two people staring at him. "Before I meet Danny," he said, "I want to know all the facts." He made sure he was sending a feeling of *crisp efficiency*, thankful for the slight edge in psi ability that enabled him to control, to some extent, the tone of the emotions he was broadcasting. It was an immeasurable help, in his profession.

"We went through them at our

interview yesterday, didn't we?" Leonard Raab said. "I thought you knew the rough outlines of the case."

"I do," Onslow said. "But in this kind of work, we have to be *sure*. Let me see, now: you say Danny was perfectly normal up to the age of—eight, was it?"

"That's right," Raab said. "He was a handsome, lively little fellow—he's still handsome, of course, but the life seems to have gone out of him since the accident."

"He had all his normal faculties?" Onslow persisted.

"Yes," Raab said. "Of course, it's hard to tell in a child, but we knew he was sending, and he was picking us up, too. He was a real part of our family unit—until the accident," he concluded sadly.

"Until the accident," Onslow said. He nodded. "Now, at the age of eight, he fell from a fourth-story window?"

"Fifth story," both parents corrected instantly.

"We were in another room," said Selma Raab. "He was still sending. We picked up *apprehension*, then a sort of *terror*, and then he fell—before we could get into the room. After that—silence. He hasn't sent since."

"Contact was broken the second he hit the ground," Leonard Raab said. "It must have been

the pain, the fear, everything else."

Onslow nodded sympathetically. He was pleased that the Raabs had adjusted so well in the past few minutes; since he had gotten them started talking on the subject that so clouded their life, a catharsis had been effected and their radiations of *despair* had ceased. It was a minor success, but it counted. A therapist always strove for such small victories.

"How **ABOUT** the boy's physical condition?" Onslow asked.

"The bones of the left leg were splintered pretty badly. He's never walked since. When he's full-grown, we'll probably have the leg amputated and a prosthetic fitted. But that's not the problem," Leonard Raab said.

"I know. It's the lack of rapport you're worried about. And that's why I'm here." He sent *self-assurance, skill*, above all *empathy*. That was the key. *Empathy*.

"Is the boy awake now?" Onslow asked.

"It's hard to tell," said Selma Raab. "He lies there so dreamily, listening to the music we play for him, that we can't tell if he's asleep or awake."

"I'll go in anyway," Onslow said. "I'll get him up gently if he's asleep. And then—then we can begin the therapy."

Excitement, anticipation, hope hope hope.

"What should we do, Dr. Onslow?" Raab asked.

"Just be patient. And under no conditions enter Danny's room while he's in therapy. Read books; do something. I'll be out in exactly an hour."

They nodded solemnly. Onslow picked up *wish to cooperate*.

He turned and tiptoed across the thick green broadloom carpet to the closed door of Danny's bedroom. Slowly, without any jerky motions, he nudged the door open and stepped inside.

A flood of unaccustomed pity washed over him at the sight of the poor, pale, incomplete boy huddled in the bed, crippled in body, and, more disastrously, in mind. Onslow was deeply moved at the sight.

Danny was thin, with fair, almost transparent skin and dirty-blonde, curly hair. He would have been a good-looking boy—but there was no life in his face. It was hardly surprising; he was really only partly alive, cut off as he was both from the physical world and from the larger, deeper world of the mind. He was aware of only the barest slice of the spectrum of life. It was a case Onslow had been proud to tackle; it meant actually restoring a human being to full life, a rewarding task for the therapist.

"Hello, Danny," he said, shad-

ing his voice delicately to communicate friendliness. There was no sense in depending on mental emanations to build up a relationship with Danny.

"Hello," the boy said sullenly, without looking up.

"My name is Dr. Onslow." The therapist took a seat at the edge of the bed. He saw a furtive scurrying under the quilt, as Danny pulled his body away to the far end of the bed. "Don't be afraid of me, Danny. Let's be friends, shall we?"

Onslow reached into his pocket and came out with a shiny miniature gyroscope. He let the toy whirl for a moment in front of Danny's eyes, then grinned and pushed it toward him. "This is for you, Danny. It's a present."

The boy flicked his pale-blue eyes scornfully at the rotating wheel. "I don't want it."

"All right," Onslow said cheerfully. With a swift motion of his hand he scooped up the gyro and dropped it back into his pocket. Danny registered not the slightest sign of interest or disappointment.

"Don't like gyroscopes, eh?"

No response.

Onslow frowned slightly and began a new method of attack. "How old are you, Danny?"

"Eight."

The therapist blinked in surprise. *Eight?* But he was eleven. This was a manifestation the

Raabs hadn't warned him of; was Danny stuck forever at the age at which he'd had his accident? That would make the task of achieving rapport with the boy's mind infinitely more difficult.

"Did you say *eight*, Danny?"

"I meant eleven," the boy said tiredly, obviously not caring. "I think. I had a birthday last month. It was a Monday."

Onslow felt relief. There was *some* temporal confusion—his eleventh birthday had actually fallen three months earlier—but that sort of confusion was only to be expected of a permanent shut-in with no contact with the outside reality.

"That's better," Onslow said. "Did you enjoy your birthday party?"

"No."

The therapist fell silent, stumped again, and felt a growing uncertainty within himself. Danny needed help—but how? How to break through that wall of bitterness?

He didn't know. But he was confident that the answer would come.

ONSLOW stole a glance at his watch. Ten-forty; the session was more than half over, and he was nowhere. Danny was tighter than a clam.

Could the boy be completely hollow? It seemed unlikely; the parents were cultured, intelligent

people who would have made some attempt to continue the crippled boy's intellectual development even after the psi-faculty had been blocked.

That was not the answer. But all of Onslow's carefully-planned probes had failed to open the boy up. And his mind was silent—terribly silent.

It bothered him. There were plenty of cases of incomplete mental communication — more than enough to keep Onslow busy—but in his twenty years of practice as a psychic therapist, he had never encountered a case where a physical shock had caused a psychic block of this magnitude.

Danny didn't like toys, he didn't like pets, he didn't like music. He didn't like reading, he didn't like singing, and most of all he didn't like Onslow. That was painfully obvious.

What *did* he like? It was going to be a struggle to find out.

Onslow moistened his lips and looked down at the too-small figure in the bed. Danny's attention, which had never been too strongly focussed on Onslow anyway, was wavering, and a somnolent shadow seemed to be passing over the boy's eyes.

"Let me tell you a story," Onslow said. His voice, naturally deep and rich, dropped nearly an octave, becoming a supple, dark

vehicle for his words.

Danny made no response, so Onslow began. "Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Alice, who lived in a country called England, on the other side of the big ocean."

He paused for a fraction of a second and stared at Danny. The boy's eyes faced the ceiling; he was totally uninterested.

Undaunted, Onslow plunged on. "One morning, Alice was sitting in the field, plucking daisies, when a white rabbit dashed by her. It ran right past her and disappeared down a hole in the ground. What do you think Alice did when she saw that?"

"I don't care," Danny said tonelessly.

"Alice ran right after the rabbit," Onslow said, deliberately ignoring the boy's reply. "She dropped down the rabbit-hole, falling all the way to the bottom. It was dark and warm, and when she landed it didn't hurt her a bit."

Good symbolism, Onslow told himself approvingly. If he'll transfer to Alice and convince himself that it doesn't hurt to fall from a height . . .

"She picked herself up and found herself in a strange and wonderful world — a world named Wonderland, ten times more wonderful than the world we live in. In fact, it was the most wonderful world possible."

A sudden flicker of animation crossed Danny's face. "Was not," he blurted. "Not true."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Not true, that's all."

"*What* isn't true, Danny?"

The boy's lips puckered impatiently and he said, "The Valley's the most wonderful world."

"The Valley? Where's the Valley, Danny?" Onslow asked, hiding the torrent of excitement that coursed suddenly through him. "What Valley?"

"*The* Valley, silly!" Danny said hotly. And abruptly he came to life.

GUARDEDLY, Onslow said, "Tell me about the Valley, then." He peeked at his watch, with that imperceptible gesture he performed so well. Ten minutes left to the session.

"The Valley's where I live," said Danny quietly. "Down by the stream of blue water that runs by my house. I swim there. I was swimming there this morning, before Hammel the Drinker came by and sang to me."

Onslow felt the thrill of breakthrough, and knew now that he was on his way to success. He listened, enthralled, as Danny poured out an account of his world.

"—the blue-clouds up above, that turn the sun green when they pass in front of it, and off in a corner of the Valley the Wig-

gies live. They have long ears and whistly noses and they don't like the water."

Danny seemed transfigured. His eyes were closed, his face appeared to be shining. "Hammel comes to me every morning and sings to me about the far-off places he's been to. He's big—lots bigger than my father, and some day he's going to go around the world with me, to the places at the other end near the edge. He's been there once, but he says he'll take me too."

When the hands of his watch told him that the hour was up, Onslow gently touched the boy's forearm. The physical contact immediately snapped him out of his near-trance, and he looked up, startled.

"I have to go now, Danny," Onslow said. "But I'll be back tomorrow—and maybe I'll get to meet Hammel the Drinker then, too. I'd like to."

Danny's face showed conflicting feelings—as if he were angry with himself for having revealed his inner world so willingly to Onslow, and yet pleased that he had been able to communicate it. "He won't be here tomorrow. Not while *you're* here, anyway."

"Maybe he'll come," Onslow said. He squeezed Danny's arm fondly, turned, and walked away, pausing at the door to smile warmly at the boy in the bed.

The Raabs were sitting pre-

cisely where he'd left them an hour before. A sudden radiation of *anxiety* hit him as he stepped into the living room, and he countered with *accomplishment*.

"Well, Doctor?"

"I think I've made some headway," Onslow told them. "It took time. Tell me—does he talk much to you?"

"Hardly ever," Selma Raab said. "He's always—dreaming."

"Exactly. He seems to have built up some sort of fantasy-world. I think that'll be my entrance to his mind."

"What do you mean?" Leonard Raab asked.

"It's a sort of perpetual running daydream," Onslow said. "I think if I can manage to enter it, to live in it with him, I can set up the sort of rapport that'll restore his psi ability."

"Really, doctor?"

"I hope so," Onslow said. "It'll take time—but I think I can do it."

They were sending *happiness*, pure and simple.

ONCE THE GULF had been bridged the first time, further contact presented little difficulty. By the third session, Onslow had worked his way completely into the boy's confidence, and he was starting to be able to feel his way around the strange world inside Danny's mind.

"The Wiggles had some trou-

ble this morning," Danny reported. "They were on Orange Mountain, and a sky-thing swooped down and bothered them."

"I hope Hammel chased it away," Onslow said apprehensively. "The Wiggles aren't very good fighters."

"Hammel was away hunting," Danny said. "But I ran up there and made the sky-thing go away. The Wiggles were happy. Later I went to Needle Hill and brought down the purple moon."

"It needed polishing, didn't it?" Onslow asked.

"It was all dusty. I cleaned it and let it float back. The sky looks better when the purple moon's polished."

Onslow leaned back in his chair—he no longer sat on the edge of the bed, since it was something Danny didn't like him to do.

Danny's world was coming clearer and clearer to him. It was flat, with edges off which one could fall. It was a colorful world, with a purple moon and a green one, orange mountains and a perpetual rainbow overhead. It was a world of bizarre creatures and daring adventures, of heroes and demons, at whose center stood Danny Raab—*on two sturdy legs*.

It was, thought Onslow, quite a lovely place—the product of a mind cut off from the normal

world, forced inward on itself. And, apparently, the product of a mind of great imaginative intensity. He watched the boy in the bed with growing respect. Each new detail, each further adventure, each more detailed bit of embroidery, left Onslow more and more in awe at the creative fertility of Danny's mind.

The days passed—two, three, then a week. Onslow found himself looking forward to his morning consultation with Danny as almost a sort of self-therapy; as he drew closer to Danny's fantasy-world, he realized that he was undergoing an experience of great beauty himself. Hammel the Drinker; bold Lemas of Onvernoire whose silver hatchet wreaked a terrible destruction among the living trees of Immersenny; frightful Dvorkal of Dvorkalo, the bearded, mole-faced witch who flew on a chariot drawn by green spiders—these were people Danny was able to communicate vividly to his new-found friend.

"How's PROGRESS?" Leonard Raab inquired conversationally, as Onslow showed up on the ninth morning.

"Wonderful. I've filled a tome full of notes on your boy. And I think I'm reaching the stage where I'll be able to enter his mind and snap the psychic block."

Powerful waves of gratitude swept toward him. Onslow knew just how important it would be to have Danny restored to the Raabs in full rapport once again. Their only child—an unusual thing in itself these days, but under the circumstances who could blame them?—and they were denied that family *oneness* that the emerging psychic powers granted.

Onslow knew how the cure could be effected. It was a matter of participation in Danny's world until he, too, seemed to be part of it. He had the characterization all worked out—Onslo, the Thinker, a giant brain and nothing else, living in a fungus-tapestried castle on the deserted, wave-swept beaches of the silent north. He had started planting hints the day before. Once he entered the Valley, it would be simple for a man of Onslow's skilled perceptive powers to explore Danny's frozen mind and break whatever trauma it was that blocked his psi.

He pushed open the door, and Danny's eyes glowed. "Hammel was just here," he said brightly.

"Too bad I missed him," Onslow said. "I wanted to warn him against the Scroobly Men from the South Ocean."

"Oh, he knows all about them. Don't worry about Hammel. But he just told me the most wonderful thing!"

"Oh?" Onslow asked, taking his usual seat.

The enthusiasm on Danny's face was a heartwarming thing. "Hammel said he had just received word from Lemas of Onvernoire that when the purple moon shines tonight, showers of diamonds will fall from the sky! And—"

Onslow sat patiently, listening as Danny poured out an involved tale of intrigue and counter-intrigue in the gloomy castles that surrounded the upper end of the Valley. The boy was a natural story-teller, Onslow thought, for at least the fiftieth time. His inner world was so real to him that it was the simplest thing for him to make it just as real to any sympathetic listener in a matter of moments. He was completely un-self-conscious, completely absorbed in the telling of his tale.

There came a point for Onslow when reality and Danny's world blended dizzily and Onslow knew he had achieved complete participation. The Valley was now as real to him as Alice's Wonderland or Elsinore Castle or, for that matter, the park across the street. In the same moment came a new, troubling realization that Onslow pushed hastily, half-thought, away. He returned to his task.

From time to time in the minutes that followed, Onslow en-

tered the stream of narrative, carefully guiding Danny's mind toward the entrance of Onslo the Thinker somewhere near the midpoint of the session.

Then it would be simple. He visualized it clearly—the logical, inevitable way in which Onslo the Thinker and psychic therapist David Onslow would become one, and David Onslow would enter Danny's mind. A few moments for reconnoitering, and then the moment of locking, the instant of rapport that would unleash the psi that had lain dormant for three years. Three years in which Danny lay dreaming, conscious only of the merest segment of external reality.

Then—then, the awakening of Danny's mind, the joy of his parents, the happy smile on the face of the cured boy—a great victory for therapy—

Don't do it.

The thought that he had repressed all morning jarred painfully into Onslow's consciousness, and everything he had been building tumbled suddenly to pieces. For a moment, only the compartment of his mind that was listening to Danny's narrative remained fully functioning, while the rest of David Onslow underwent torment of a sort he had never experienced in his life before.

He could cure Danny. He knew that.

But when he did, the Valley would disappear, forever.

HE LET the hour come to its conclusion without attempting to control the flow of conversation in any way, made his usual farewell to Danny, and stepped uncertainly into the hallway.

He paused there, struggling to evaluate the thing that had happened to him.

Danny's world had become part of his own. Danny was an artist—a great creative artist, immature though he was. Somehow his poor sick tortured mind had dug into its own resources and had spun a delicate fabric of rare delight.

Why did this happen, Onslow asked himself, as he stood alone in the hall. And why was such story-telling vanishing from the world? Why? Why?

People were sane, that was why. They were healthy, well-adjusted, in psychic rapport with each other, perfectly secure, perfectly convinced—and rightly so—that theirs was the best of all possible worlds.

Not Danny. What little Danny could see of his own world was clouded by pain and uncertainty. So he created a new one.

Who were the great artists? Beethoven—too deaf to hear his own music. Mozart—a sickly pauper, dead at 35. Leonardo, Shakespeare—sexual deviates by

modern standards. Van Gogh—a confused, unhappy madman. They wove great art from the torment of their souls. No one had adjusted them. Torment was the wellspring of creation. Some fundamental disharmony was present in the minds of great creators—well hidden in some, nakedly apparent in others.

And Danny? Danny was in that company. Curing him would make him "happy," certainly—but would it ever allow him the deep satisfaction beyond happiness that the artist feels? Not at all, Onslow thought. Not at all.

He walked into the living room, conscious of his ashen face.

"Well, how are we going?" Mrs. Raab asked—and then, as she picked up Onslow's radiations, her face changed. "Something wrong?"

"Yes," Onslow said slowly. "I attempted the final entry today. I couldn't achieve it. It won't work." He hoped the Raabs' perceptions were sufficiently blunt so that they would not notice the half-truths he spoke.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Raab asked hurriedly. "Won't Danny be able to—"

"Danny can't be cured," Onslow said. "The block is *not* psychically induced; it's physical, something that happened when he fell."

That was an outright lie, but they didn't seem to notice. Onslow's hands felt cold; he put them in his pockets and shifted his weight uneasily from side to side.

Their faces were bleak. Mrs. Raab was close to tears—though she was far too healthy-minded actually to cry. Leonard Raab stared stolidly ahead. Onslow detected an undercurrent of repressed suspicion coming from them; his mind was sharper than theirs, but they knew something was wrong.

But was it? Was he breaking his oath? When is a cure not a cure? He had sworn to bring the greatest possible fulfillment to his patients—not necessarily to cure them, if curing them did more harm than no cure at all.

There were enough sane men in the world, Onslow thought. Just one less wouldn't matter. Just one. He would leave Danny alone. When he grew up, he would pour out his bitterness, his loneliness, in imaginative works that would astound and delight the world.

The Raabs were looking at Onslow strangely, and he struggled to pull himself together. "This will terminate our consultations, of course," he said. "But I want to assure you of one thing—Danny may be an unhappy little boy, but he'll be a great man some day."

They looked at him in total astonishment, but Onslow knew that they were picking up waves of such passionate sincerity from him that they would not doubt his diagnosis. They would trust him—and Danny would grow up some day.

"I'll have to leave now," he said hoarsely. He zipped his jacket with trembling fingers. Some doubt still remained in his mind.

The next Beethoven—the next Leonardo—or a well-adjusted little boy? *Which is more desirable*, he asked himself, *on an absolute scale? Do I have any right to do what I'm doing?*

His eye wandered up and caught the Gioconda above the fireplace. She seemed to be smiling in approval.

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BULLETIN—What with Sputnik, fallout, IGY, et al, *everybody* reads science fiction now. Don't get trampled in the rush to newsstands! Subscribe to **INFINITY** by sending \$3.50 to Royal Publications, Inc., 11 West 42nd Street, New York 36, New York.

A POUND OF PREVENTION

*They knew the Mars-shot might fail,
as the previous ones had. All the
more reason, then, for having one good meal!*

By G. C. EDMONDSON

Illustrated by RICHARD KLUGA

WITHOUT his hat General Carnhousei was just a tired old man. Three men sat at the other side of the table. "No use trying to gloss it over," he said.

The young men nodded. If this shot failed it might be a hundred years before Congress could be conned into another appropriation. The three young men had an even better reason not to fail. They were going to be in the rocket.

Hagstrom spoke. "There were no technical difficulties in the previous shots."

"Right," the general said. "Take-offs proceeded according to schedule. Orbital corrections were made; then everybody settled down for a four-month wait.

When deceleration time came the shot was still in the groove."

"We know," van den Burg said tiredly. He worked a microscopic speck of dirt from under a fingernail. There was a loud snap as he snipped the nail off. He stared at the general, a lean forefinger to one side of his ascetic nose.

"I'm no expert," the general said wearily. "When you reach my age they turn you into an office boy."

Hagstrom lit a cigarette. "It's tomorrow, isn't it?"

The general nodded. "They're loading now."

The third man's slight build and bushy black hair belied his mestizo origins. "I still don't

think much of those rations," he said.

Hagstrom laughed suddenly. "You aren't going to con me into eating pickled fire bombs for four months."

"If I lived on prune soup and codfish balls I'd make no cracks about Mexican food," Aréchaga grunted. "You squareheads don't appreciate good cooking."

"You won't get any good cooking in zero gravity," the general said. They got up and filed out the door, putting on their caps and military manners.

OUTSIDE, trucks clustered at the base of a giant gantry. Aréchaga shuddered as a fork lift dropped a pallet of bagged meat on the gantry platform. The meat was irradiated and sealed in transparent plastic, but the habits of a lifetime in the tropics do not disappear in spite of engineering degrees. All that meat and not a fly in sight, he thought. It doesn't look right.

Multiple-stage rockets had gone the way of square sail and piston engines when a crash program poured twenty-two megabucks into a non-mechanical shield. Piles now diverted four per cent of their output into a field which reflected neutrons back onto the pile instead of absorbing them. Raise the reaction rate and the field tightened. Those sudden statewide evacua-

tions in the early years of the century were now remembered only by TV writers.

A liquid metal heat exchanger transferred energy to the reaction mass which a turbine pump was drawing from a fire hydrant. Since the hydrant was fed from a sea water still there was no need for purification.

The last load of provisions went up and an asepsis party rode the gantry, burdened with their giant vacuum cleaners and germicidal apparatus.

"They'll seal everything but the control room," the general said. "When you go aboard there'll only be one compartment to sterilize."

"I still think it's a lot of hogwash," Aréchaga said.

"They can't have us carrying any bugs with us," van den Burg said tiredly.

"The Martians might put us in quarantine," Hagstrom added sourly.

"If there are any Martians—and if we get there," Aréchaga groused.

"Now boys," the general began.

"Oh, save it, Pop," Hagstrom said. "Let's be ourselves as long as the public relations pests aren't around."

"Anybody going to town?" van den Burg asked.

"I am," Aréchaga said. "May be quite a while before I get



another plate of fried beans."

"Checkup at 0400," the general reminded.

Hagstrom went to B.O.Q. Van den Burg and Aréchaga caught the bus into town and lost each other until midnight when they caught the same bus back to the base.

"What's in the sack?" Hagstrom asked.

"Snack," Aréchaga said. "I can't stand that insipid slop in the B.O.Q. mess."

"Looks like a lot of snack to eat between now and daybreak."

"Don't worry, I've got quite an appetite."

AT 0345 an orderly knocked on three doors in Bachelor Officers' Quarters and three young men made remarks which history will delete. They showered, shaved, and spat toothpaste. At 0400 they walked into the Medical Officer's door. A red-eyed corpsman reached for a manometer and the three men began taking their clothes off. Fifteen minutes later the doctor, a corpulent, middle-aged man in disgustingly good humor for 0400, walked in with a cheery good morning. He poked and tapped while the corpsman drew blood samples.

"Turn your face and cough," he said.

"You think I'm going to develop hernia from riding a night-

mare?" Hagstrom growled. "You did all this yesterday."

"An ounce of prevention," the doctor said cheerfully.

"A pound of bull," van den Burg grunted.

"Now boys, what if that got in the papers?" asked a voice from the doorway.

"Damn the papers!" they greeted the general.

"Do we get breakfast?" Aréchaga asked.

"You'll take acceleration better without it."

"Tell my stomach that."

"Bend over the table," the doctor said.

"Oh, my aching back," Hagstrom moaned.

"That's not the exact target, but you're close. And awaaaay we go," the doctor chanted as he drove the needle home.

Each man received an injection of antibiotics and drank a paper cupful of anise-flavored liquid.

"Don't we get wrapped in cellophane?" Aréchaga asked.

"You'll be pure enough when that purgative goes through you."

They dressed and rode in the general's staff car to the base of the gantry. As the car stopped, the general said, "Well boys, I hope you don't expect a speech."

"We love you too, Pop," van den Burg said. They shook hands and stepped aboard the gantry platform. Hagstrom muttered and they faced a telescopic TV

pickup with mechanical grins until the rising platform shielded them.

Each had his own control board and each was prepared to take over another's duties if necessary. They took off the baggy coveralls and tossed them into lockers. Aréchaga's made an odd clunk. He hitched up his shorts and turned quickly. They checked each other's instruments and settings, then went to their couches. A clock with an extra hand ticked the seconds off backward.

"We're ready," van den Burg muttered into a throat mike.

"So're we," a speaker answered tinnily.

The second hand began its final revolution in reverse. With blastoff it would begin turning in its proper direction. There was a clang as the water hose dropped its magnetic nipple. The rumbling became louder and the G meter climbed to 3.5. After several minutes the needle dropped suddenly to 2. Aréchaga tried to lift his head but decided it wasn't worth the effort. The rumbling stopped and he knew the sudden panic of free fall.

He made the adjustment which controlled arc flights and free fall parachute jumps had taught him and unstrapped. The speaker's tinny voice read off numbers which they transmuted into turns of two wheels with axes at right angles. Since the weight of the

remaining reaction mass could not be calculated with exactitude they spun by trial and error the last few turns until a telescope parallel to the thrust axis zeroed on a third magnitude pinpoint whose spectroscope matched the tinny voice's demands.

"Why such a razzy speaker?" Hagstrom groused as he spun a wheel.

"A paper cone gets mush-mouthed in 3 G's," van den Burg grunted.

Aréchaga set the pump for 1.6 seconds at four liters. He nodded. Hagstrom pulled the rods. Weight returned briefly; then they floated again. Van den Burg belched. The tinny voice approved, and Hagstrom dropped the cadmium rods again. "Anybody for canasta?" Aréchaga asked.

THE FIRST DAY nobody ate. Overtrained, blasé—still, it *was* the first time and the stomach had yet to make peace with the intellect. The second day Aréchaga broke the pantry door seals and studied the invoices. He gave a groan of disgust and went back to sleep. With something solid strapped in on top it was almost easy.

On the third day van den Burg put bags of steak and string beans into the hi-fi oven and strapped himself into a chair. He used chopsticks to snare the globules

of soup and coffee which escaped from hooded cups despite all precautions.

"How is it?" Hagstrom asked.

"It'd taste better if you'd come down and sit on the same side of the ship."

Human Factors had recommended that table and chairs be situated in one plane and resemble the real thing. The sight of one's fellow man at ease in an impossible position was not considered conducive to good digestion.

Hagstrom dived across the room and in a moment Aréchaga joined him. Aréchaga sampled the steak and vegetables and turned up his nose. He broke seals and resurrected pork, beef, onions, garlic, and sixteen separate spices. There was far too much *sancoche* for one meal when he was through.

"What'll you do with the rest of it?" Hagstrom asked.

"Eat it tomorrow."

"It'll spoil."

"In this embalmed atmosphere?" Aréchaga asked. He sampled the stew. "Irradiated food—pfui!" He went to his locker and extracted a jar.

"What's that?" van den Burg asked.

"*Salsa picante.*"

"Literal translation: shredding sauce," Hagstrom volunteered. "Guaranteed to do just that to your taste buds."

"Where'd you get it?" van den Burg asked.

"Out of my locker."

"Not sterile, I presume."

"You're darn tootin' it ain't. I'm not going to have the only tasty item on the menu run through that irradiator."

"Out with it!" van den Burg roared.

"Oh, come now," Aréchaga said. He poured *salsa* over the stew and took a gigantic bite.

"I hate to pull my rank but you know what the pill rollers have to say about unsterilized food."

"Oh, all right," Aréchaga said morosely. He emptied the jar into the disposal and activated the locks. The air loss gave the garbage a gradually diverging orbit.

HE BEGAN cranking the aligning wheels. When the stars stopped spinning, he threw a switch and began reading rapidly into a mike. Finished, he handed the mike to Hagstrom. Hagstrom gave his report and passed it to van den Burg.

Aréchaga rewound the tape and threaded the spool into another machine. He strapped himself before a telescope and began twiddling knobs. Outside, a microwave dish waggled. He pressed a trigger on one of the knobs. Tape screamed through the transmitter pickup.

"Make it?" Hagstrom asked.

"It began to wander off toward the end," Aréchaga said. He switched the transmitter off. The temperature had risen in the four minutes necessary to squirt and the sunward side was getting uncomfortable even through the insulation. Hagstrom began spinning the wheel.

Aréchaga fed tape into the receiver and played it back slowly. There was background noise for a minute then, "ETV One. Read you loud and clear." There was a pause; then a familiar voice came in. "Glad to hear from you, boys. Thule and Kergeulen stations tracked you for several hours. Best shot so far. Less than two seconds of corrective firing," the general said proudly.

HAGSTROM and van den Burg returned to their books. Aréchaga snapped off the player and went into the pantry. The light dimmed and brightened as the spin exposed and occulted its accumulator. He filed the information subconsciously for his revision list and glared at the provisions.

Shelves were filled—meats, vegetables, fruits, all held in place by elastic netting. The skin-tight plastic was invisible in the dim light. Aréchaga began to feel prickly as the lack of ventilation wrapped him in a layer of steam. All that food right out in the open and no flies. It just isn't right, he thought. He shrug-

ged and picked out three apples.

"Keep the doctor away?" he asked as he swam back into the control room. Hagstrom nodded and caught one.

"Thanks, I'm not hungry," van den Burg said. He put his book under the net and began taking his own pulse.

"Something wrong?" Aréchaga asked.

"Must have been something I ate," he grunted.

Hagstrom eyed his half-eaten apple with distaste. "I must have eaten some too." He threw the apple into the disposal and belched. Aréchaga looked at him worriedly.

Two days passed. Hagstrom and van den Burg sampled food fretfully. Aréchaga evacuated the disposal twice in six hours and watched them worriedly. "Are you guys thinking the same thing I am?" he asked.

Van den Burg stared for a moment. "Looks that way, doesn't it?"

Hagstrom started to say something, then dived for a bag and vomited. In a moment he wiped his mouth and turned a pale face toward Aréchaga. "This is how it started with the others, isn't it?" he said.

Aréchaga began talking into the recorder. He killed spin long enough to squirt. In a few minutes the razzy speaker again made them part of Earth. "—and hope

for the best," the general was saying. "Maybe you'll adjust after a few days." The voice faded into background noise and Aréchaga turned off the player.

"Any ideas?" he asked. "You know as much medicine as I do."

Van den Burg and Hagstrom shook their heads listlessly.

"There's got to be a reason," Aréchaga insisted. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry. Like I hadn't eaten for two weeks."

"The same," Hagstrom said. "Every time I eat it lays like a ton of lead. I guess we just aren't made for zero grav."

"Doesn't seem to be hitting me as quickly as it did you two," Aréchaga mused. "Can I get you anything?" They shook their heads. He went into the library and began skimming through the medical spools.

When he returned the others slept fitfully. He ate a banana and wondered guiltily if his *salsa* had anything to do with it. He decided it didn't. The other crews had died the same way without any non-sterile food aboard. He floated back into the pantry and stared at the mounds of provisions until the mugginess drove him out.

THREE MORE DAYS passed. Hagstrom and van den Burg grew steadily weaker. Aréchaga waited expectantly but his own

appetite didn't fail. He advanced dozens of weird hypotheses—racial immunity, mutations. Even to his non-medical mind the theories were fantastic. Why should a mestizo take zero grav better than a European? He munched on a celery stalk and wished he were back on Earth, preferably in Mexico where food was worth eating.

Then it hit him.

He looked at the others. *They'll die anyway.* He went to work. Three hours later he prodded Hagstrom and van den Burg into wakefulness and forced a murky liquid into them. They gagged weakly, but he persisted until each had taken a swallow. Thirty minutes later he forced a cup of soup into each. They dozed but he noted with satisfaction that their pulses were stronger.

Four hours later Hagstrom awoke. "I'm hungry," he complained. Aréchaga fed him. The Netherlander came to a little later, and Aréchaga was run ragged feeding them for the next two days. On the third day they were preparing their own meals.

"How come it didn't hit you?" van den Burg asked.

"I don't know," Aréchaga said. "Just lucky, I guess."

"What was that stuff you gave us?" Hagstrom asked.

"What stuff?" Aréchaga said innocently. "By the way, I raised

hell with the inventory getting you guys back in condition. Would you mind going into the far pantry and straightening things up a little?"

They went, pulling their way down the passage to the rearmost food locker. "There's something very funny going on," Hagstrom said.

Van den Burg inspected the stocks and the inventory list suspiciously. "Looks all right to me. I wonder why he wanted us to check it." They looked at each other.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Hagstrom asked.

Van den Burg nodded. They pulled themselves silently along the passageway back to the control room. Aréchaga was speaking softly into the recorder, his back to the entrance. Hagstrom cleared his throat and the black-haired little man spun guiltily. Van den Burg reached for the playback switch.

"It's just a routine report," Aréchaga protested.

"We're curious," Hagstrom said.

The recorder began playing. "—I should have figured it right from the start. If food is so lousy the flies won't touch it, then humans have no business eating it."

"What's the food got to do with it?" Hagstrom asked.

"Quiet!" van den Burg hissed.

"—got by all right on Earth where there was plenty of reinfection, but when you sealed us in this can without a bug in a million miles—" Aréchaga's voice continued.

"If food can't rot it can't digest either. Irradiate it—burn the last bit of life out of it—and then give us a whopping dose of antibiotics until there isn't one bug in our alimentary tracts from one end to the other. It's no wonder we were starving in the midst of plenty."

"Wait a minute. How come you didn't get sick?" Hagstrom asked.

Aréchaga flipped a switch and the recorder ground to a stop. "I reinjected myself with a swallow of *salsa picante*—good, old-fashioned, unsanitary chili sauce."

A horrible suspicion was growing in van den Burg's mind. "What did you give us?" he asked.

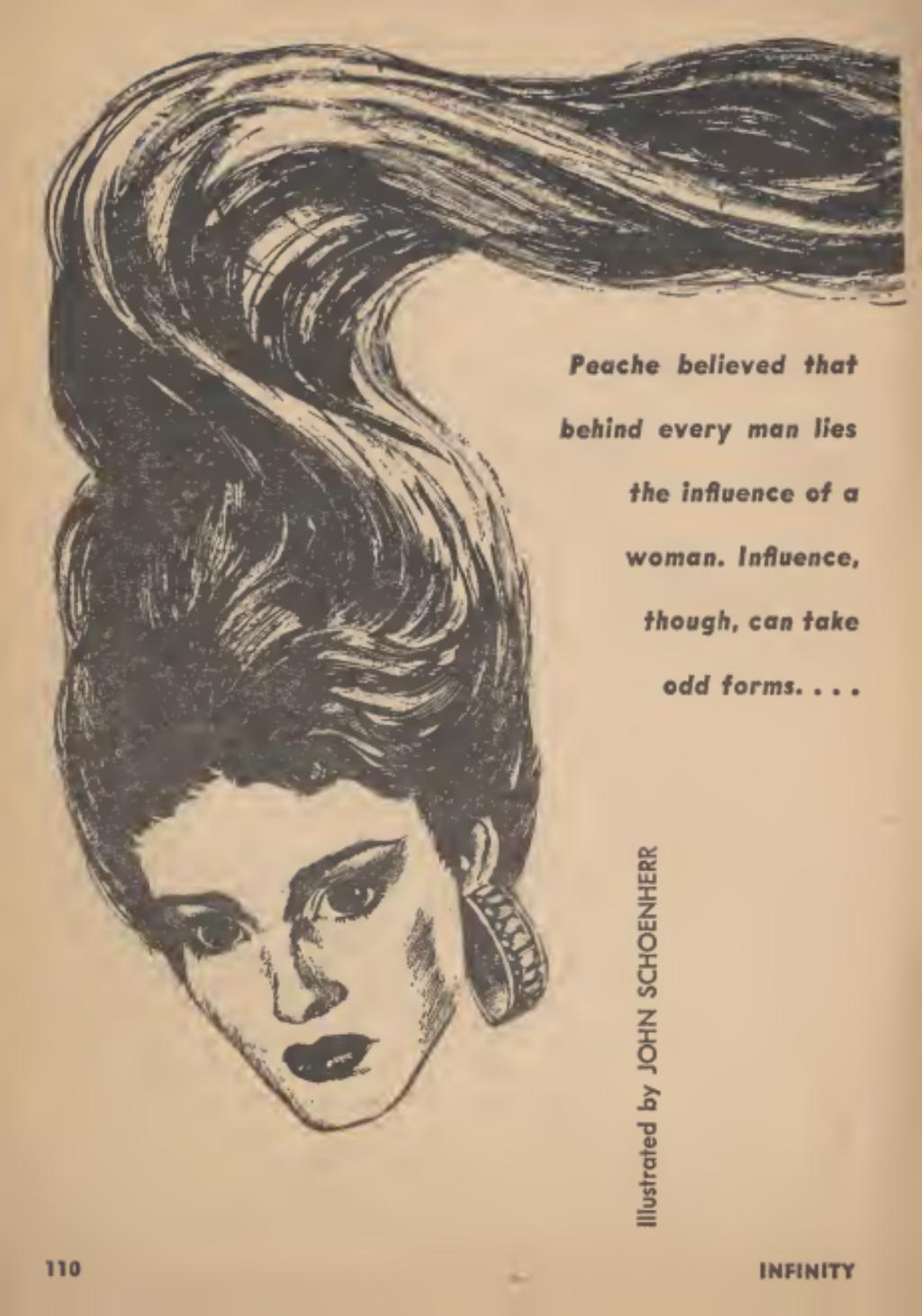
"You left me little choice when you threw out my *salsa*," Aréchaga said. "Why do you have to be so curious?"

"What was it?" van den Burg demanded.

"I scraped a little salsa scum from the inside of the disposal. It made a fine culture. What did you think I gave you?"

"I'd rather not answer that," van den Burg said weakly.

∞ ∞ ∞



*Peache believed that
behind every man lies
the influence of a
woman. Influence,
though, can take
odd forms. . . .*

Illustrated by JOHN SCHOENHERR



WEST O' MARS

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

OF ALL THE PLANETS, Peache liked Mars best. Peache was a salesman, and his territory was the inhabited planets and moons. There were things he liked about each one, even Earth, but he particularly enjoyed the gentle gravity of Mars—a gravity that made him feel as though he were flying when he walked in long, easy leaps, and yet didn't frighten him by letting him shoot halfway out to space.

His stop at Mars in 2081 added an experience which

Peache considered an extraordinary piece of luck. Having supper with Samlaan Britt in West o' Mars was comparable to having tea with Shah Jehan in the Taj Mahal.

The supper had been incomparable. Now the two of them sat in the Dice Room of the tower, warmed by a green and orange blaze in the huge fireplace, and smoked the sweet, strong, foot-long cigars that are produced only in the Hadriacum Lowlands of Mars. Beyond the double-thick

glass of the window-wall, the sun was setting behind the fantastic dunes of the Aeolia Desert.

Around them in the dim-lit room, the air was thick with cigar smoke, haunted by the aura of legend. The tales of the founding of West o' Mars were vague: Peache had heard the vast wealth that built it had been won on a single throw of the dice, that Britt had been driven to build it by the hatred of a woman he loved, that he had built it above the bones of a man who had stolen his wife, that it was a memorial to his wife. While he was here, Peache hoped to sift truth from fancy, for he was a man of romantic bent.

Below them the tower dropped down the side of the cliff to a clear dome on the now-shadowed lowland of Lacus Lucrinus. The dome enclosed most of the majestic building and its exotic gardens from the thin, oxygen-poor Martian air. It was a daring conception, nowhere duplicated—an airtight building that projected high above its plasticene dome.

Peache inhaled a long sweet draft of smoke and blessed the fact that his product was the latest in weather-control units. Only for such a major purchase would Samlaan Britt have invited him here.

"You aren't married, Mr. Britt," said Peache when the conversation provided him with an

opening. "Don't you get lonesome out here, hundreds of miles from the nearest city, with no one around but robots?"

"I have many tapes and films, Mr. Peache," replied Britt, smiling. He was a short, slight man with close-cropped gray hair and round, guileless eyes. "I have my gardens, and the lowland of Lacus Lucrinus, and the desert."

"Even so, I'm surprised you haven't found a woman to share all this beauty and wealth with you. I'm sure there are many of them who'd be willing."

"No doubt," replied Britt drily. "But I am a man of peculiar tastes. I enjoy my own thoughts, and generally I prefer my own viewpoint unalloyed by the differing outlook of someone else. I find your company interesting for an evening, Mr. Peache, but few women could share this isolation without becoming bored and, consequently, a nuisance."

Then Peache told Britt of his theory: that behind the accomplishments of every successful man, somewhere, lies the influence of a woman. It might be that his mother babied him far into puberty, and he achieved things to prove his integrity as an individual. It might be that he reacted to an unhappy love affair by proving himself a better man than his more fortunate rival.

"In my case, I was the only boy among eight children," said Peache. "I chose the freedom of traveling about through space, I think, through an unconscious desire to escape from a female-dominated society. I think achievement in any field is a sublimation of the sex drive, and I understand you did not inherit any of your wealth, Mr. Britt, but amassed it all yourself."

Britt was silent for a moment, contemplating the end of his cigar.

"And, of course, you're curious about the conflicting stories that are spread around the system," he suggested. "Well, there was a woman, Mr. Peache, but I'm afraid what occurred has nothing to do with your theory."

WEST O' MARS (said Britt) represents a dream I have cherished, I think, since boyhood. I think the seed of the dream must have been sown when I saw the early newsfilms of the dome-cities on Luna and Mars.

The dream drove me to study architecture. Man was expanding swiftly into space and my primary interest was in extra-terrestrial design. I faced a bright future.

But twenty years ago, when I met Dori, the realization of West o' Mars seemed farther away than it had in boyhood. An architect's draftsman is paid well but

not lavishly, and you can imagine what sort of wealth was required to build a place like this, forty million miles from Earth.

My trouble was, I was in a hurry. My weakness was, I knew that the turn of a card or the roll of the dice could double my weekly salary. It could but, of course, as often as not it didn't. Consequently, I might be rich for a day, only to go hungry for a week.

It was during one of the hungry periods in 2060 that I attended a meeting of the Astronaut Club for the sake of my stomach. I was living then in Huntsville, the Alabama spaceport city, and it was for business reasons that I belonged to the Astronaut Club.

The food was fair, the speeches dull. I was little interested in the entertainment that was to follow, but I wanted to finish my cigar and coffee. The entertainment, it turned out, was Dori.

Her father came out of the wings first, a consumptive old man with a shock of unkempt gray hair. In the center of the table he laid a small rubber ball, a coin and a pair of dice.

He bounced the rubber ball. It bounced a few times and subsided, after a couple of helpful Astronauts had prevented it from rolling off the edge of the table. He tossed the coin about a dozen times and rolled the dice about a dozen times, to prove that the

falls were at random. All the while, he gave out a tired, monotonous spiel about the laws of chance.

Then Dori came out. She was too thin to be pretty, but there was a childish appeal about her. She had big, dark eyes in a sad little face, and almost colorless hair. She impressed me not at all. What held me then was that something obviously was to be done with dice.

The old man bounced the ball again. Dori stood a little way from the table and did nothing but keep her eyes on the bouncing ball. It bounced. It kept bouncing. It did not slow down. At the top of each arc, something invisible seemed to give it an additional downward push, so that it did not stop. When it drifted toward the edge of the table, something invisible seemed to guide it gently but forcefully back to the center.

The old man tossed the coin. Dori watched it silently as it spun in a sparkling arc. It fell heads. He tossed it again. It fell heads. As long as anyone at the table still doubted—nineteen times, I think—he tossed the coin and it fell heads.

The old man rolled the dice. Dori watched them as they rolled. They fell seven. He rolled them again. They fell seven. This time I counted. Twenty-two times he rolled the dice, and twenty-

two times they fell seven. Then someone called for an eight, and they fell eight.

The act ended on a farcical note, with water jumping from a glass to splash the shirt front of Gerss, the club president. Gerss, whose shirt was well stuffed, didn't appear to appreciate it much, but the others roared. Then Dori and her father retired—and I was up from the table, nearly upsetting my chair, to follow them.

Most of the other members of the Astronaut Club undoubtedly thought the act was a clever piece of legerdemain. But I knew the power Dori possessed, for I had read much about it and had yearned for it myself.

OBVIOUSLY, Dori had strong psychokinetic ability. If you are not familiar with that, Mr. Peache, it is the ability to manipulate physical things by means of the mind alone. It is still a subject for investigation, but it was a quality that Dori possessed beyond any doubt.

I caught up with them in the next room, waiting; for Greene, our club secretary, was a cautious man and never paid entertainers in advance. When Dori's father realized I was not the man bringing his money to him, he sat down disconsolately in a straight-backed chair and let me talk to Dori without interruption. Prob-

ably he had been through this before.

I introduced myself to Dori and, since her impatient expression didn't encourage idle chatter, started right in with:

"You and your father are picking up pennies, when you could be rich. Now—"

"If you were going to offer to be our manager, you're wasting your breath. My father has had such offers before, and we want no manager. He's satisfied with things as they are."

That's what I had planned, although being their "manager" would have been only a blind for what I had in mind. I changed my tack.

"As a matter of fact, I was interested in you, Miss Dori. I was attracted to you the moment I saw you. I wonder if you'd go out to dinner with me tonight?"

It was a risky invitation, for I'd have to borrow money for such a date, and prospective creditors were wary of me by now. Her face lit up a little at the words—I'm sure she had received such a compliment rarely, if ever. But she said:

"My father doesn't allow me to go out with men."

I thought a minute.

"Surely, he couldn't have any objection to my visiting *him* tonight, could he? And if you're there, well . . ."

"We're staying at the Ringo

Hotel," she said after a moment's hesitation, and favored me with a shy smile.

Well, I was able to borrow some money, and with it I bought a few flowers for Dori and a quantity of the rawest, cheapest whiskey I could find. I had recognized the symptoms of the sot in the old man's pouchy face and shaking hands.

The Ringo Hotel was a rundown place in the eastern sector of town. The old man was not especially glad to see me when I appeared early that evening, but his attitude changed quickly when I unwrapped the liquor. Within an hour he was dead drunk and snoring on the bed.

Dori drank nothing, and I drank just enough to loosen my tongue and my inhibitions. It was not the sort of romantic atmosphere I would have preferred, with the two of us facing each other in hard, straight-backed chairs, the bare light bulb glaring down on us and the old souse snorting away in his drunken dreams; but I was determined not to let this opportunity escape me.

I talked my way carefully, without making any precipitous advances or suggestions, and I soon learned one inescapable fact. Dori had no love left for her father and would leave him in a moment; but her long-dead mother had instilled in her a

rigid morality that left no door open for an informal association, no matter how attractive I made it. There was one course open to me.

"Dori," I said, "I have never married because all my life I have been waiting for the woman to appear whom I knew would be right for me. When I saw you, I thought you were that woman and now I know. Will you marry me?"

Now, would you think any woman would consider such a proposal seriously from a man she had met eight hours before, especially a sedate, conventional woman like Dori? It was an indication of her hatred of the life she led that she did not even glance at the old man on the bed.

Her answer was in the light that flooded her thin face. In that moment, she was beautiful.

I HAD MADE fast work of my courtship of Dori, and I made fast work of the task of getting rid of her father. After our marriage, I gave him enough money to get blind drunk, and then we left town in a hurry. As much as she had grown to detest the old bum, Dori did not particularly approve of this trick, but she had surrendered to a love for me so complete she was willing to do anything I asked without question. I understand he died in jail soon afterward.

Our match was not an unhappy one. I have no great capacity for affection, but I was not cruel to Dori. To win her in a hurry, I had had to convince her I was desperately in love with her, and it was to my interest to continue the illusion.

For my plans encompassed no continuation of the piddling little magic show she had put on with her father. I was a gambler, and with Dori at my side a great field of opportunity lay before me.

I don't know if you are familiar with the game of dice, Mr. Peache? No? It's a very ancient and honorable game.

The player with the dice rolls them. If a seven or an eleven comes up, it's a natural and he wins the bet and keeps the dice for another roll. If a two, three or twelve turns up, it's craps and he loses his bet but keeps the dice for another roll. If any other number comes up, that's his point, and he keeps rolling the dice until either that number repeats or a seven comes up. If he wins his point, he wins the bet and keeps the dice, but a seven loses him both his bet and the dice.

Dori's method of controlling the dice was to control one of them. When they are rolled, dice rarely stop at the same instant. She would let the first one stop, then keep giving the other the necessary mental push until it

reached the number that gave the combination she wanted. Since the numbers on each die run from one to six, seven was the only number she could be sure of forcing; but if a point were set, she could prevent the dice from hitting seven until the opportunity occurred to make the point.

She was reluctant at first to use her ability in a way she felt was dishonest, but, as I said, she had given herself up to adoration of me, and it took only a little affectionate persuasion to soothe her conscience into abeyance. She did what I asked, and in a remarkably short time we entered on a life of ease and luxury that was strange to both of us.

No more for me the small-time gambler who folded on a bluff when only a few dollars were at stake. I knew where the big fish swam, and I went after them.

Naturally, dice was my game. Since childhood I had been an expert at cards, but cards do not lend themselves readily to psychokinetic manipulation, without the additional talent of clairvoyance, and Dori had none of that. But how she could make those dice tumble!

By the time the people who had both money and the gambling instinct realized I was one of those infallible phenomena to be avoided, we were rich beyond

even my dreams. Suicides and paupers were left in our wake.

It seems that for every advantage a man gains in life, he is faced with a corresponding disadvantage. He must pay the piper. Here I have wealth, and West o' Mars, without Dori. . . . Well, I anticipate myself.

You may not know it, Mr. Peache, but even now I might find it dangerous to be back on Earth again. It certainly was advisable for me to leave Earth at that time. Some of the men I had broken had not been left without the means to avenge themselves on me.

So Dori and I came to Mars.

THOSE WERE the days before there were luxurious space liners. Laugh if you will, Mr. Peache, but they are luxurious; I haven't traveled in them, but I've gone through them at Marsport. When Dori and I came to Mars, passengers were strictly expensive cargo who slept and ate on the centerdeck with the crew and were told brusquely to stay out of the way if they went north of the centerdeck. For a modest woman like Dori—the only woman aboard on this trip—it was an ordeal; always at least one crew member was sleeping or relaxing on the centerdeck, and I had to shield her with a blanket when she dressed or undressed. An inadequate towel

was her only screen when she took a shower or went to the toilet.

I had feared trouble because my wife would be the only woman aboard, among a dozen men, on a trip that would last for months. Those fears were groundless. I understand that now women make up an adequate percentage of the crews, but at that time they solved the problem by doctoring the food while a space.

But tensions mount under such conditions, perhaps more so when their main outlet is suppressed. The terrible thing about the trip, for me, was the deadly monotony. The crewmen had their jobs which, surprisingly to me, kept them busy throughout their duty shifts. Dori, being a woman, was more placid than I. But for me the monotony was torture: you must remember that, besides the lack of privacy, our food was doctored, too, and we could not have lived as man and wife had we had privacy.

Of course, I played cards with the crew, for there was always at least one who was off duty and not sleeping. But I had determined I would do nothing to make Mars as untenable for me as Earth had become, and I resisted the temptation to really gamble with any of them. And gambling for pennies is not card playing to me.

The man who came to my rescue at last was the astrogator, a Hawaiian named Kei. With Polynesian perspicacity, he had smuggled a personal supply of liquor aboard, against regulations. The other crew members knew he took a nip regularly on off-duty hours, but they never could locate his cache.

"Pretty dull, huh, groundie?" remarked Kei as we played gin rummy with cards that insisted on floating off into the wilds of the gravityless centerdeck. "Maybe I can pep things up. Ever been drunk in free fall?"

"No," I said. "I'm afraid I don't have your foresight."

He grinned smugly.

"You got to try it once, anyhow," he said. "Maybe once will be all you'll want, though, after the hangover hits you. It makes DTs look like a Grade B movie. Let's go down to the storage deck."

I glanced over at Dori. She was apparently asleep in her bunk.

We went below, and Kei broke out a bottle of fair whiskey from a cache behind one of the storage cabinets. He winked at me, cracked the cork and passed it over.

It didn't take long for the liquor to take hold, and I began to realize what Kei meant when he said it was an experience every man should go through once. As

you know, when a spaceship is in "free fall," with no rockets blasting, there is no gravity at all, and you float free in space. To be drunk in free fall is to add the freedom of the alcohol to the freedom of space. You float on rosy clouds, not just mentally, but physically. You swim around in nothing, airily, deliciously. There's nothing on Earth or Mars like it, because you can experience it only in space.

I saw, too, why Kei would go to the storage deck to drink, even if he hadn't kept his private cache there. On the storage deck, your wild gestures won't hit some vital lever or button—and no one else can hear your ravings. For there's something about a space drunk that makes you babble. You talk your head off; you talk your heart out.

A space drunk is a good catharsis for all the mental quirks and repressions that have been bothering you, and maybe I needed such a catharsis. Possibly Kei did, too. At any rate, we chattered to each other like boyhood chums, telling our dreams, our aspirations, revealing our most secret vices and meannesses.

I was not shocked, but duly sympathetic, to learn that Kei had knifed his brother to death in his teens, and had taken up space service to escape the resulting complications. Beside this revelation of fratricide, my own

selfishness and my cold-blooded reasons for marrying Dori seemed tame. But I made it as strong as I could.

"She thinks I love her!" I shouted, laughing uproariously, and Kei laughed with me. "Think of that! I'm a brilliant, hard-headed, practical man, and look at her: nice enough, but washed-out, colorless. She's useful. She's made me rich. But if I'd pick out a woman to fall in love with . . ."

Floating in the air as I talked, I had swung around gradually, and now my eyes fell on the companionway to the centerdeck above us. Dori was clinging to it, and from her expression I could tell she had heard everything I said about her.

Her eyes were enormous from the shock, and her face was as grief-stricken as though I had stabbed her callously through the heart without cause. She turned without a word and left the deck.

In my drunken exaltation, it seemed funny to me. I laughed about it, and made jokes about it to Kei. I felt quite smart and heartless. Later, during the hangover, it didn't seem so funny, but, on the other hand, I was so miserable I didn't care one way or the other.

Dori spoke of it to me only once, and that was just before we blasted down to Mars in the G-boat. She looked at me levelly

and said, without a trace of emotion:

"I hate you, Samlaan. Always remember that."

MARS was a wild frontier planet then, where violence was not out of the ordinary. The spirit of the adventurer and the pioneer pervaded it, as it does the outer moons today. But the frontier has its own code, which makes it safer sometimes than the steel and stone jungles of civilization.

I had what I wanted now—riches—and I had no desire to be forced to leave Mars, too. There was no more gambling for me, no more living on the edge of the law. I bought into several respectable business ventures, content to add to my wealth slowly.

Dori and I built a home in Syrtis Major near Mars City and lived a quiet life together. Mars at that time was a man's world; it lacked divorce laws and similar legal and social machinery for terminating unsuccessful marriages. I doubt that Dori, being what she was, would have taken advantage of such avenues, anyhow. She was a good wife to me; she lacked only that former breathless adoration which had meant so little to me.

A few years after we arrived on Mars, we were invited to a week-long house party at the

home of a business acquaintance, Leswill Odaan. Odaan's wealth was comparable to my own, and he lived here, in the lowland of Lacus Lucrinus.

These house parties are not as common now as they were in the old days. At that time, they were the major social activity of the rural dwellers of Mars. One invited one's friends for a week at his private dome in the lowlands—maybe twenty or forty at once. Then for a year or two he could expect to be a guest at similar parties every month or so, scattered all over the inhabited area of Mars. That's why the old homes of the wealthy out in the lowlands are so big.

Odaan didn't live in West o' Mars; I built it later. He had a square, sprawling chunk of buildings under a dome out in the center of the Lacus Lucrinus lowland. It was a crude display of raw wealth in execrable taste, with 14th century tapestries and neo-modern furniture mixed up in rooms which might be of Egypto-Cretan architecture. I saw nothing he owned to excite my envy—until, on a sage-jumping jaunt across the lowland the second day of our visit, I climbed the western cliff and saw the desert.

Bleak, lonely beauty has a strong appeal for me, Mr. Peache. Perhaps it is because it strikes a chord in the bleakness

and loneliness of my own heart. But I never had seen anything before, and I never have seen anything since, to match the stark beauty of those buttes in the Aeolia Desert, as seen from the western cliffs of *Lacus Lucrinus*.

It was then that the conception of *West o' Mars*, as it could be and should be, sprang full-blown to my mind. I tell you, Mr. Peache, I saw this place then in my imagination, just as it is today, with this tower and this great window that overlooks the desert.

I had to have *Lacus Lucrinus*. And Leswill Odaan owned it.

When I got back to the dome, I tried to buy the lowland from him. He laughed and named a price that was beyond even my means. It was not that he was particularly fond of the place; he just didn't care to sell.

I studied my man for the weakness that would give me what I wanted. He was a big man, a boisterous man who loved action and talk. He was younger than I, and handsome, with the rich good looks inherited from his Black Irish ancestors.

One thing I noted, and filed in my mind in case it should prove valuable. He liked Dori. He was a bachelor, as were most of his guests, for women were scarce on Mars then. He knew she was my wife, but he couldn't keep his eyes from her. I think

perhaps it was the appeal to such a man as Odaan of that childish wistfulness and helplessness in her which I have described to you.

What gave me my lead was seeing him play roulette that evening. The sparkle of the born gambler shone in his eyes, and he pushed the stakes up and up, much too high for a sociable game. At that moment, I decided to break my resolution not to gamble on Mars.

IT WAS NOT HARD to talk Odaan and several other men into a game the next night. I wanted dice, but Odaan preferred cards. The others didn't seem to care. At last, Odaan turned to Dori, who was standing at my side.

"I'll leave the decision to Mrs. Britt," he said, smiling up at her. "Which shall it be, Mrs. Britt—dice or cards?"

My heart leaped, for Dori knew why I preferred dice.

"Cards," she said in a cold voice, and walked away.

Well, if Dori were going to take that attitude, cards would be better for me anyhow. She might turn the dice against me. I didn't fear my ability at cards.

I don't use a marked deck in cheating at cards. I use the natural ability of my hands. My cheating has not been detected yet, that I know about.

I have to qualify that statement, because I never have been sure whether Odaan knew I was cheating on my deals. Certainly, he was very cautious on hands which I dealt, betting low and going out even on fairly good hands. On the other hand, I never did see him cheating, but he bet with confidence on the hands he dealt.

Odaan was inclined to go for higher and higher stakes anyhow, and I was interested in pushing the stakes higher. Before long, everyone else had been forced from the game. It was the two of us against each other.

I was sure Odaan was not cheating and, since I couldn't get the sort of bets I wanted from him on the hands I dealt, I bet recklessly on those he dealt. For a while the luck swung back and forth between us evenly. Then he hit a winning streak.

Neither of us was drinking. We were cold sober, and we were betting thousands on the turn of a card. Hours passed, and I could no longer cover my bets with liquid assets. But my luck had to change. I began betting my property—my business property, my stocks and investments, at last my home in Syrtis Major.

It was nearly dawn when I realized I had nothing more to bet. Everything I had built up on Earth and brought to Mars with me, everything I had added to

it on Mars, belonged to Odaan now. I was a pauper.

I pushed the cards aside and started to get up from the table, soaked with perspiration, when I saw Dori standing in the door. She was looking at me across the heads of the intent spectators, on her face one of the most wistful expressions I have ever seen.

There was my ticket back to wealth.

It could be a long, slow pull; I could wind up leaving Mars as I had left Earth. Or I could use that ticket to win it all back now. It was a desperate chance, a chance that depended on the vagaries of Dori's emotions. It was my only chance.

"Odaan," I said calmly, "you have no wife, and I see you like mine. I'll make a last bet with you. My wife against all you own —what you've won from me and your own possessions as well."

Odaan stared at me a long moment, then he turned slowly and saw Dori standing there. In that instant, I was convinced he had not been cheating.

"All right," he said, and he sounded as though he were strangling. "Deal the cards."

He drew his heat-gun and laid it on the table before him, as if warning me. Maybe he didn't know, but he suspected. I could not take a chance on cheating now; and, the way the cards had been running, I couldn't take a

chance on them without cheating.

"Not cards," I said. "I'll roll the dice with you, Odaan."

He hesitated, then said:

"All right. I'll go and get the dice."

He left the room and brought them in: a pair of white dice with black spots, still sealed in their plastic box bearing the stamp of *Luna-Mars Exports*. That was an unshakable guarantee that they were honest dice.

I broke the seal.

"Dori," I said, "come here."

Dori came to my side.

"Dori," I said, "I'm going to roll the dice with Mr. Odaan. I'm betting you against everything he owns, and everything I did own. If I lose, you belong to him and I'm a penniless outcast. Do you understand that, Dori?"

"I understand," she answered in a low voice.

"All right," I said. "Let them roll."

We rolled first for possession of the dice. The dice bounced in slow motion, tantalizingly, in the weak Martian gravity. I rolled an eight, and Odaan rolled a five. I had the dice.

I rolled them and watched them spin, holding my breath. Dori could control them. Would it be craps, or a natural? Would I lose, or win?

The first one stopped on three. I let out my breath in a gasp of

relief. Craps was impossible now.

The second die rolled and tumbled, and stopped. It was another three.

My point was six.

Hot anger swept over me. Dori had not touched the dice with her mind. It was not just that it hadn't been a natural—I could tell. I had gambled long enough to tell when the dice fell free, and when they were influenced.

"My point is six," I said. "Excuse me, Odaan. I want to talk with my bet a minute."

I took Dori into the next room.

"Dori, for God's sake!" I cried in a desperate undertone. "You are letting those dice roll free. Do you realize what happens to me—to us—if I don't make that point?"

I give her credit for this: she didn't rant at me, as most women would, that I had no right to bet her in a dice game, like a slave. Nor did she throw up to me what she had overheard on the spaceship. She just looked at me silently, and that look told everything she could have said in words.

"Dori, please," I said. I felt like getting on my knees to her. "Maybe you despise me now, but for the sake of what we've been to each other once, just this one time control the dice!"

She looked at me, and now I

could read nothing in her expression.

"I'll control the dice," she said tonelessly.

We went back in, and I was sweating in terror and anguish when I picked up the dice. One of us was to be destroyed utterly on that roll, and only Dori could decide which one. Would she destroy Odaan? Or me?

I rolled the dice out on the table, and I don't think anyone in the room breathed, except Dori. One of them fell almost solid. A five.

The other die spun and tumbled. A two would ruin me. A one would ruin Odaan. Anything else would just postpone the inevitable.

The die slowed, bouncing.

"Take it, Dori!" I prayed silently. And Dori took it.

The die had almost settled when it was nudged, almost as by a physical push. It rolled over slowly—to the two! It teetered on the farther edge of the two, it appeared about to settle back . . . and it rolled on over to the one.

A five and a one lay there on the dice. A single black dot and a five on the white dice. A six. I had won!

"A six," I said. "Odaan, you're a guest in my house."

Odaan sat there as if hypnotized, unable to take his eyes from the little black and white cubes.

"They . . . they rolled like

loaded dice!" he exclaimed in a voice that was barely audible.

"They're your dice, Odaan," I said.

Odaan got up and made a great, sweeping gesture, a gesture of defeat. He stumbled away through the crowd.

Dori stood looking at me with tragic eyes, and I looked up into her white, child-like face. I knew then that I loved Dori, that I never would love another woman.

BRITT sat silent, staring into the flickering fire.

"Mrs. Britt . . . has passed on since then?" suggested Peache sympathetically.

Britt tapped the ash from the tip of his half-smoked cigar.

"Dori?" he said. "Oh, no. As far as I know, Dori's still alive. She ran away with Odaan the next day."

"With Odaan?" gasped Peache.

"Yes. She hated me, as she said. And I had been willing to gamble her, while Odaan had bet everything he owned for her. At that time there was a law that no woman could leave Mars—because of the shortage of women here, you know—and he had to get a job operating a towmotor at Marsport to stay on the planet with her. Of course I warned all my friends against gambling with him, since he had Dori.

When the law was repealed, they returned to Earth, and I understand several children came of the union."

"But," protested Peache, "if Dori was in love with Odaan, why would she control the dice to lose the throw for him and win everything for you? I just don't understand."

"Well," said Britt with a thoughtful smile, "she didn't in-

tend to. She intended to push the die only over to the two, giving me a seven and winning for Odaan. But, as I told you, I had not gambled before since we had been on Mars, and that was her first effort at controlling the dice since we left Earth.

"She just gave the die too hard a mental push. She forgot the gravity of Mars is only four-tenths that of Earth!"

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TALES FOR TOMORROW

Recently, INFINITY declared all-out war on science-fictional cliches. We've always been opposed to the trite, but now we're going to greater lengths than ever to obtain stories based on brand-new ideas and fresh treatments of old themes. And the policy is definitely getting results, as will be evident next issue.

Exhibit A will be the first installment of a three-part serial by Robert Silverberg. Its title, *Recalled to Life*, is also its theme—or as much of its theme as we will give away now. What would happen if mankind discovered a process which would restore life to individuals who had recently died? That's the basic question—and the answers are complex and disturbing. This is sure to rate as one of the most thoughtful and provocative sf novels of all time; and you'll also be impressed by Silverberg's ability to create a gallery of characters that are different from any you've met in science fiction before, yet fully rounded and entirely believable.

There will also be an exciting novelet by a top-notch author making his first appearance here, Poul Anderson. *The High Ones* projects the conflict behind today's headlines into the far future, and provides some new answers to the question of what may happen when Earthmen collide head-on with a vastly superior science and technology.

Plus, of course, our usual line-up of unusual short stories and departments. On sale—March 18.

Feedback



I WAS most glad to read your views on the life of science fiction in "By the Editor" in January's issue of INFINITY. I suspect that maybe you, too, have read the ridiculous attack on science fiction by Daniel Delbruit in a national newspaper article release on October 20th, 1957.

I definitely do not agree with Mr. Delbruit that the Earth satellite has crashed the science fiction world. And I am rather (rather? —very much) angered at him for making such statements. For those who claim SF is not good literature, this article must have been very satisfying. But for persons like myself, it only brought infuriation, and a desire for revenge upon this act of sabotage.

At any rate, we have to protect our own interests, and I think you have done nobly well. I just hope that others shall have courage, and afford all efforts possible to make science fiction a very accepted and tremendous literature.

All best wishes in reaching our goal! — Charles Thomas, 114 Brookview Avenue, East Peoria, Illinois.

oo

Mr Shaw—

When I want McCalls, I'll buy McCalls.

Yr/ saccharine-surfeted svt/,
don berry.

(I'm with you. Shall we drink to it?—LTS)

oo

Mr. Damon Knight
c/o Infinity Science Fiction
Dear Damon Knight:

I am not "that noisy creep" and have not lived at 11550 1/2 Friar Street, North Hollywood, California, for quite some time. However, I believe I know Mr. Edwards and can, if you wish to establish a personal relationship with him, supply some solid clues to his whereabouts. In regard to the fracas itself, I will say that I wrote no letter to INFINITY's correspondence department and do not particularly relish having my name bounced about simply because the actual culprit (or hero, depending upon one's point of view) happened to set down an address that used to be mine.

For the record, I consider your reviews the best and most thoughtful in the field; but, as I once remarked to a certain chap, who enthusiastically agreed, I believe you hit the wall and burst into flames whenever you attempt to deal with Matheson. He has apparently become your bête noir, as you have become Edwards'.

Anyway, leave me out of the damn thing.—Charles Beaumont,

12808 Collins Street, North Hollywood, California.

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While I don't want to start an out-and-out war like the still-smouldering Damon Knight affair in your letter column, I still want to voice some opposition to the letter from Alma Hill, printed in your March issue.

Being a hopeful, but as yet untrained, seventeen-year-old artist, who has ambitions of sharing the spotlight with Ed Emsh someday in this wonderful world of science fiction, I am naturally concerned with all things pertinent to SF art. Alma Hill's letter irked me as much as INFINITY's artwork did her. First of all, I would like to voice my opinion of Richard Kluga. I interpret him as potentially a good SF artist, but who expresses his ideas in a most crude technique. Principally he is a mood-creator—and a good one, I might add—but what he lacks is a more finished method of drawing his pictures. Furthermore, he displays a disgusting lack of proficiency in anatomy. This frequently benefits him as he draws BEM's and the like, as it adds to a sense of weirdness, but his human beings are a sorry sight.

So much for Kluga. Being a devout, devoted, sincere, and fanatical fan of Ed Emsh, I *must* say something in his defense. Lately I've been seeing considerable comment over inaccuracies in his illustrations for your mags. If some people would consider Ed's total output per month in the field of SF, they might be less apt to pick up

their magnifying glass and play Sherlock Holmes with his work. When a man turns out as much artwork as Emsh does, it is hardly possible to avoid minor, trivial errors, which the majority never discerns anyway.

Before I leave the subject of Ed Emsh, I would like to commend him for the beautiful job on "And Then the Town Took Off." He did a wonderful job of getting the same mood in his pictures that Richard Wilson did in his story, and I challenge anyone to find any errors in these illustrations! I shall personally meet any antagonists on the field of honor, armed with Tom Corbett paraloray gun!

Now that I've let out so much hot air, I'll comment briefly on the March issue as a whole. Wilson's serial was delightful and very refreshing. The humor was very subtle and the plot was quite original. Robert Young's "The Leaf" was most striking and impressive. Sheckley's "Accept No Substitutes" was very entertaining. Wellen's story left me cold. I just don't dig that lad! Bob Silverberg's novelet was below average quality, in my opinion, and the rest of the issue was about average.

This is my first correspondence to a science fiction magazine, and I hope not the last.—Timothy Dumont, 30 Munchausen Avenue, Bristol, Connecticut.

(Thanks for leaping to the defense, Tim, but you underestimate our Alma. See her latest, just below.—LTS)

∞

The trouble with Emsh's drawing is that he uses lay figures for models. (*How's that again?*—LTS) This shows up in the lack of balance in or out of motion. I will stick to it that you can tell an Emsh drawing with or without signature because the line is good, the design is good, and every figure looks as if it had just been kicked in the sitty. Now you consider that drawing of the girl in the fur coat, who is falling, according to the author, in a faint from shock, having just beheld a monstrous sight on TV. (We can go into the credibility of this some other time.) No such a thing. The natural fajnter lets go at all joints, naturally. Knee joint disconnecka to the thighbone, hip-joint etcetera; the whole business folds down like an accordion, arriving on the floor face down. Now this babe has obviously just been slugged on the jaw and hooked around one ankle by the thug who is fleeing out past camera. Nothing else would make her do a pratfall as stiff as that one, with or without the kick she seems to have just had, too. (*The one time I fainted, I went flat on my sitty.*—LTS)

You have that man Emsh followed and find out if he isn't in the pay of someone of the other sides. It reeks, man. At the very mildest he must have a subconscious grudge against science fiction. Maybe his mother was frightened by a typewriter, so he can't agree now with a page of print.

Another question: was that cover done before or after the story was written? It is a handsome cover, nobody can fairly deny that. But

here is Richard Wilson's description of the outline of super-Superior: "a neat sharp edge, not one of your old ragged, random edges such as might have been caused by an explosion. This one had a feeling of design behind it."

Furthermore, this impression is conveyed by an examination of the edge by starlight.

Decent adherence to the author's description really calls for a straight edge. A curve always seems natural, even a smooth curve.

Emsh, however, likes things ragged and random, and as for his opinions of authors' descriptions, it is only too clear in the way he treats them.

Later, there is a cleanup job in which the hero reports, lamely, that the shape of Superior is that of an orange cut in half. The girl thinks he sounds dumb. So does this reader. Is that Wilson talking? *How does either character know WHAT the place looks like from underneath?* Whereas that is the main thing everybody from the ground *would* know. Everywhere else, Wilson is intelligent. If you try to clean up after Emsh, Larry, be sure you get it all. The way he rips and tears into the scenery, he does a reaching job on it.

He has the makings of a good illustrator, especially if he can develop a professional conscience, but until then, caveat videtur.

That's not the half of all he did to this story, but when I look at all those nice smooth meadows where the author says there is no landing place for a plane, I give up, bub, words fail me, and when words

fail me the ultimate is nigh at hand.

Anyway, it's a perfectly delightful story.

I have a suggestion. Why don't you just let Emsh illustrate Garrett's stories? Garrett doesn't give a whoop about plausibility, as witness the mesh-enclosed antenna he starts the story with. Now I may be wrong, but us tuning-knob radio experts have the idea that such a type would be inefficient. I read the story just to be mean. No luck; the story turned out to be pretty good, considering the abominably dull start. Garrett writes at minimum competence too much. I read a Garrett story last and not always then.

The story I liked most was the little thing by Chan Davis. That is nice work. Good consistency, good detail, good extrapolation from current trends in applied economics. Making a struggling underdog of the little sales pitchman was a very natty tourdeforce.

Is science fiction dead? A story as good as that has always been a needle in the haystack. It's not the size or shape or mood or style or type—it's the quality of mind. Quantity and quality, or some such. Hard to describe, a joy to recognize.—Alma Hill, 14 Pleasant Street, Fort Kent, Maine.

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Heated reply to:

Art Coulter, 297 Canyon Drive,
Columbus 14, Ohio. (Oct. '57)

Now look here, Art:

Subject: Damon Knight.

I do not care if, as you say, Knight is no critic; Knight is God.

That he plays unfairly.
Insults.

Should be psychoanalyzed.
What he is doing.

How he betrays a great idea.
That he lacks the milk of human kindness.

It just makes absolutely no never mind! Because I don't care. I don't care because each time I read a Knight criticism, I learn something that is of developmental value to me about the craft of writing. From where I sit (facing a typewriter and the first draft of my third novel), learning from Knight, learning from anyone and everyone who can give a pointed and applicable word, is of first order importance, allowing as how the moment one stops learning . . . well, *you* know what happens, don't you?

Note to Shaw:

It seems incredible that INFINITY had to go to the 6th issue in the 2nd volume for me to see a second copy. I cannot understand how all this could have been going on without my sniffing something off the wind at LASFS about wonderous quality and such stuff. As a matter of fact, I became so involved with "The Last Man Left in the Bar" that I felt the urge to rush out into the street and offer him a refuge, an eagerly believing ear—I even felt like paying for one of his rounds of Red Top and beer!—Helen M. Urban, 6520 Satsuma Avenue, North Hollywood, California.

∞

Have had the January INFINITY for some time. I believe that the

best story was "Outside Saturn," although by a small margin. The whole magazine, except maybe for "Beyond Our Control," had a zany devil-may-care flavor to it that was not altogether beneficial.

"Lenny," by Asimov, was a very good story, and may someday grace a collection on the flavor of "I, Robot." I hope so. But I wonder why the care Asimov has taken in back-dating this and a few other recent tales to fit into a time period a little before the end of *I, Robot*, only so he could play around with poor Susan Calvin? I should think his agile mind could conceive good plots for his shorts in the temporal vicinity of *Caves of Steel*.

"And Then the Town Took Off" has such a completely understated air to it that I don't know whether to take it for a serious attempt at science fiction or to let it go as a serious attempt at an unbelievable farce. It sits better with me as the latter.

"Beyond Our Control" was the best plot in the magazine. Not new, but the most interesting. It suffers from the absence of an attempt to write it well enough to be a complete success. This is hard to understand, in view of Garrett's infrequent though excellent novlettes for *Astounding*. "The Statistomat Pitch" was also an excellent story, and I'm glad it is set in the fairly far future. It is entirely possible.—Bill Murphy, 207 South Andre Street, Saginaw, Michigan.

oo

INFINITY is certainly the rising star in science fiction. And please

don't get into a rut. Keep your stories varied. Personally I like humor of the Peterson-Wilson variety. The more the merrier. Wilson you've got now but Peterson not for some time. Bring him back please and often—but give us dead serious stories, too. Variety, pls. An *infinite* variety.—T. R. Mandell, Jr., Portland, Maine.

oo

I must plead guilty, as Isaac Asimov charges me, with using the number googol a little loosely—rather like the disgusted little boy who, when asked how many sisters he had, said, "Billions." When one uses a cardinal number of this size, one doesn't always expect to be taken literally.

I don't think, however, that I can properly be charged with a violation of scientific fact, as Ike implies. The number of atoms in the universe is not a fact, but a conjecture; since nobody at this juncture knows whether the universe be finite, infinite or transfinite, let alone its true average distribution of matter. Ike's figure represents a majority opinion, true, but if I wish to gainsay him (say on purely esthetic grounds, such as preferring kinematic to Einsteinian relativity), he cannot say me nay.

In fact, in *his* universe, which I take to be Einsteinian, I can absolutely forbid him the faster-than-light travel which he has often used in stories, as a definite and serious scientific error; but he cannot forbid it in mine, which is Milnean.

Next round?—James Blish.

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Isaac Asimov

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